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FEBRUARY 2ND



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TREK TO GLORY

**By
WILL WATSON**

The Anza party reached Yuhá Wells at dusk, and the wind was sharp across the California desert, bringing misery to man and animal alike. Behind them—to the southeast—reared the ugly dark butte of what is now known as Signal Mountain, and ahead was the rim of the Sierra Madres.

This was the autumn of 1775, and the Imperial Valley had snow—one of the few times in history that snow has fallen on the California desert. Mules and horses plodded, hungry and thirsty, and women, children and men were cold and miserable. And many miles of desert lay ahead.

The year before, Captain Juan Bautista de Anza, accompanied by a small party, had at the request of the King of Spain—King Charles the Third—penetrated the desert from Sonora to Monterey, on the coast of what is now the State of California. He and his party were the first white men to cross what is now the Imperial Valley.

Rumor held that the Russians, who then occupied Alaska, were moving down the coast and King Charles, anxious to hold California for the Spanish Crown, wanted an expedition of soldiers and their wives stationed at San Francisco. Therefore this second expedition of Captain Juan Bautista de Anza.

A guide rode back, said, "Yuhá springs are almost dry. We'll have to dig for any water we get out of it, Captain."

Possibly Anza felt the pull of discouragement. The trip from Sonora, in Old Mexico, to the site of what is now Yuma,

(Please continue on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

there on the Colorado River, had been uneventful, except with the struggle with Apaches at Tubac. Even the crossing of the muddy Colorado had been without mishap or loss of life.

But, after fording the river, the desert and its sand dunes had been unfriendly, and water had been scarce. The night before they had camped at the base of Cerro del Impossible—Mount Signal—and their camp had been on the present site of the city of Mexicali.

Anza was the boss of a big party. They had started out with a population of two hundred and forty people, many of them women and children; mules and horses had numbered almost seven hundred; over three hundred and fifty head of cattle had been driven with the party, for cattle supplied milk and beef.

"It will take a lot of water for this caravan," the guide said.

Anza said, "Tell them work is ahead." He rode toward the direction of the well, head down against the wind. They were in a badland country of adobe buttes and hills of oyster shells. For, not many years before, this had been the bed of a great body of water.

Yuha Springs is not, in reality, a spring. It consists of seepage, and is located on the side of a grassless, adobe butte. The summer had been dry and therefore the seepage was low. Even today, the water of Yuha is brackish and tastes of alkali.

And on that night of December 11, 1775, men and women worked to clear the springs, so that stock and man might water. The wind was shrill in the ledges and oyster-hills, and the wind was cold as it came down from the Sierra Madres. They carried water in baskets to cattle and horses. Then, tired and cold, men sought blankets—blankets thrown on the ground, and there, exhausted, they slept.

(Please continue on page 10)

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(Continued from page 8)

Father Font, spiritual advisor to the party, checked his followers before he went to sleep on his hard bed. Then, braced against the wind, he went to where Anza had made his headquarters.

"I fear, Captain Anza, for the night, for surely an animal will die, if not a human. The animals are full of water and they have no grass and this wind has ice in it."

"We will do our best, Father. We can do no more."

"Last year you were through this desert. Was it this cold at that time, with snow and this wind?"

Anza said, "Last year the desert was warm. But it is better to go through in the fall or winter than to attempt a crossing in the summer. This party could not go through when the intense heat comes."

The priest considered this, his heavy face thoughtful. All during the trip he had been bothered with stomach trouble, a plague that had hit man and beast alike, for the water, as a general rule, had been bad.

"Where is the next water, sir?"

Captain Juan Bautista de Anza had drawn a map based upon the route taken on the previous trip—a route they were now following. The fat priest watched the expedition's leader let his forefinger run to the north, stop in an arroyo.

"Last year there was water here."

"But this year, the Yuma redskins said, has been very dry. What if water waits not there?"

The forefinger continued north, swinging a little west. It stopped on a spot where two creeks came together.

"At San Sebastian there is always water. Now we had best make another round of the camp to see all men and animals are as comfortable as they can be under these terrible circumstances."

"How many leagues to San Sebastian Springs?" the priest wanted to know.

"Perhaps there is not water at the arroyo."

"A long ways, Father."

The Father sighed, "This is indeed a hard trip, Captain."

Next morning two horses were dead, victims to starvation and cold. They got the expedition fed and into line and scouts went out, working to the north and northwest. The year before the Indians had not been bothersome here on the desert that was flanked by high mountains to the west—mountains from which the cold wind poured down from snow-covered peaks.

Anza's people were discontented, cold and hungry. But the worst was behind, the leader figured. He himself rode ahead and when he came to the arroyo where they were to make noon camp he found not a trace of water.

Another dry camp.

BUT a little galleta grass grew here. Horses and cattle and mules cropped it and were watered sparingly from canteens and barrels. The wind was cold but the snow had drifted against chamiso brush and desert sage. Spiny ocotillos raised upward, gray and lined with thorns an inch long. A few mesquite trees grew along the arroyo, grim testimony that water lay underneath. Despite their lack of foliage, they did make a little wind-break.

Father Font said, "We have to move on, or we die."

These were simple facts. Every person in that expedition realized them. The good Father held a Mass, then mules and horses and men plodded again, heading for San Sebastian Springs. The terrain rose slowly, adding more to their troubles as they climbed through the sand and across gravel.

Father Font asked, "I wonder how the other parties are, Captain Anza?"

For the expedition had broken up into three parties at Yuma. Thus, in smaller

(Please continue on page 12)

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(Continued from page 10)

groups, Captain Anza had reasoned they could move easier.

"We wait for them at San Sebastian, Father."

The wind came and brought dusk. Snow was gone and sand stung them. Finally a guide rode back, whipping his horse wildly. Men and women stopped and stared, and Father Font crossed himself.

Was San Sebastian dry, too?

The guide hollered "Water up ahead a mile! Lots of water! Some grass too, for our stock!"

Today San Sebastian is known as Harper's Well. To the west rises the Fish Creek Mountains and to the south is Superstition Mountain, where today hardy souls seek Peg Leg Smith's lost gold mine.

Here, at San Sebastian, the party united. Here lived a few score of desert Indians who viewed with awe the coming of the white men. But the weather turned even colder and snow fell again.

That night, according to Father Font's diary, a horse and eight head of cattle froze to death on a desert that, in September held temperatures up to one hundred and twenty degrees in the shade.

The next day the second division came into San Sebastian, cold and hungry and shivering. The next day the third and last section arrived, in worse shape than even the second division.

"We lost fifteen head of mules and horses," the leader of the third division reported. "We lost them at Yuha Springs. Froze to death. Yuha Springs had a little water, but not much— From here on out it isn't so bad, is it?"

"More desert ahead, sir."

They held a wild and boisterous celebration that night at San Sebastian.

Next morning, at Sunday Mass, Father Font rebuked his people, saying the celebration looked more like a tribute to the

devil than a thanksgiving to God for successful passage across the desert.

Next morning, the party, all united now, with the Imperial desert behind them, turned toward the northwest and the mountains now known as the *Lagunas*, which are a part of the California Coast Range, or the Sierra Madres.

They crossed into what is now called Borrego Valley. This is a high desert plateau marked by desert juniper that is bent and deformed because of the high winds that sweep across the desert, roaring down from the mountains. Here ghost-trees, gray and faint, grew in the distance, a sage-colored mirage. Desert willows were bending under the wind.

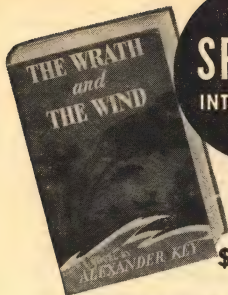
They found water here, and then pushed on toward the coast. They went up Coyote Canyon, and crossed at San Carlos Pass. The whole terrain changed suddenly, for they were on the watershed side of the mountains.

Yuha had been a badland country, marked by spiralling buttes, their adobe sides gaudy with shells, splashed occasionally by color. From Yuha north, the desert had stretched, marked by the Superstitions, by Fish Creek Mountains, by the higher reaches of the Sierra Madres. The land had been desolate with little life beyond that of the coyote or jackrabbit.

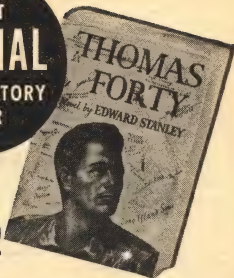
Here was grass for tired cattle and mules and horses. Water there was too, for man and beast. A deer jumped out of a thicket.

Father Font said, "We bow our heads in prayer and thank God for our successful trip. From here on we travel from mission to mission, and our path will be easier."

Captain Juan Bautista de Anza and his settlers settled on the Golden Gate just one week before the United States Declaration of Independence was adopted at Philadelphia—completely across the continent of North America—by the first Continental Congress.



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The Wrath and the Wind is as cruel as sin, brutal as the plague of which Maury is the agent, solacing as late-found love and forgiveness. Alexander Key has the Gulf Coast and the sea in his blood. His writing creates an unforgettable atmosphere as remarkable as his portrayal of intense action and dramatic suspense.

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Suddenly he hurtled over the edge of the roof.

By
WILLIAM
HEUMAN

Who was this man McVane, who hired out his gun to the pariah of the range—and deliberately goaded a whole town into white-hot fury?

DEATH GUNS

1

At four o'clock in the afternoon Broken Bow was still quite dead. Steve McVane drove the buckboard down the right side of the dusty street, the reins loose in his hands, his cold gray eyes missing nothing.

He saw the owner of the General Dry Goods Store, Matt Quenton, watching him through the window, his hands on his hips, a grim expression on his face. A bartender in front of the Commanche Saloon, a broom in his hands, stopped, turned around, and gave Steve a full stare as he went by.



*Dramatic Novel of
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IN BROKEN BOW

Steve McVane looked at him contemptuously, and then spat in the road. He went on past the main intersection, and he glanced up at the plate glass window on the second floor above the Cattleman's National Bank. The lawyer, Craig Hudson, sat on the other side of the window, looking down on the street. Steve could make him out vaguely, a thin, graying man with a gray mustache.

Turning the two sorrels down Depot Street at the corner of the hotel, Steve pulled the buckboard up alongside the railroad station. The beer wagons were lined up near a siding, the drivers sitting in the shade of their wagons, smoking. They looked at Steve as he stepped down from the buckboard and walked along the platform toward the little waiting room.

He wasn't looking their way, but he saw one of them go through the motions of taking a gun from his imaginary holster, cocking it, and firing it several times.

Instead of going into the waiting room, Steve walked to the end of the platform, stepped off, and came directly toward the wagons, his black, flat-crowned hat pulled over his eyes. He didn't seem to be walking very fast, but in a short time he was standing in front of the two men as they sat on the ground.

He was tall and he looked leaner than he was because his face was thin. He stood there, hands shoved in his back pockets, looking down at the two drivers. He wore a Colt .44 strapped on his right side, and the leather of the holster was black and shiny, very smooth. He said softly:

"Any trouble here, boys?"

The man nearest him was squat, red-haired, shifty-eyed. He'd been the one who had made the motions. He looked at the ground nervously, and then up at Steve. He said gruffly:

"Hell, there ain't no trouble here, mister."

"Figured there was," Steve smiled. "Next time you make out you're drawin' a gun, friend, better have one in your hand. You might wake up dead."

The redhead gulped. He sat cross-legged on the ground, fiddling with a wisp of straw. He didn't say anything, but he glanced nervously at his friend, a smaller, fatter man.

Steve said tersely, "You hear me, Red?"

"I hear you," the driver muttered very softly.

"Thought you weren't listening," Steve murmured. He reached out with his right boot, placed the sole of the boot against the red-headed man's left shoulder, and pushed gently.

The red-head cursed as he toppled backward, but he made no attempt to get up. The other driver sat where he was, staring straight ahead of him, saying nothing, doing nothing.

Steve McVane turned his back on the two men and walked back to the station. He was about to go inside when he heard the distant train whistle, and he saw a thin plume of white smoke against the eastern skyline. He sat down on a crate facing the tracks, and he was stuffing his pipe when the stationmaster came out, green eyeshade pushed back on his head, a cigar in his mouth.

He was an old man, with bent shoulders, thin gray hair. He looked at Steve, nodded coldly, and walked out to the edge of the platform. Then he went back into the station again without saying a word.

Steve looking at his pipe, a cold smile on his face. He was sitting that way when the train came in. Four passengers got down. Two of them were drummers with their heavy bags, the third could have been a wealthy cattleman coming back from an eastern trip, and the fourth passenger was a girl.

Sliding off the crate, Steve McVane

stared at her for a moment, and then his lean, tanned face cracked into a wide smile. He rapped the ashes out of the pipe even though he'd just started to smoke it, stuffed the warm pipe in his pocket, and walked toward the girl.

She was dressed in traveling brown, and she wore a trim little brown hat, decked with a white feather. She could not have been more than twenty-one or twenty-two. Steve McVane was thinking of Kent Allman's rather unflattering conjecture as to her appearance. Kent had said:

"She'll be tall, bony, forty, with a hooked noose and spectacles, and she'll try to boss this outfit the way she bosses her classroom back east. Take her to the hotel, Steve. Tell her it would not be proper to stay out at the ranch with a man. It'll flatter her to hell and back."

She had brown eyes and no spectacles. Steve McVane said to her, "Miss Cotter?"

The girl nodded. She studied Steve casually, and then she said, "You're not Mr. Allman?"

Steve shook his head. "Kent sent me down to set you up at the hotel," he explained. "He—he was tied up at the ranch, ma'am."

"I see," Miss Cotter murmured, and Steve was thinking of her first name—Abigail. That was the thing on which Kent Allman had undoubtedly built his picture of her.

"I'm Abbey Cotter," the brown-eyed girl said. She had brown hair, too, a rich dark brown.

Abbey is better, Steve thought. *Much better*. "Told me to tell you," Steve went on, "wouldn't be proper to put up at the ranch. People in these towns talk."

"Do they?" Abbey smiled. "I'm amazed."

STEVE smiled back at her, and then he watched her eyes move down to the gun at his side, to the well-oiled holster,

and the pearl handle of the Colt .44. Pointing to the gun with a gloved finger she said:

"Do you shoot coyotes with that?"

Steve McVane's fingers caressed the butt of the gun. He said softly, "Reckon that's what they say, ma'am."

She looked at him for a moment as if to see what the joke was, but Steve's brown face revealed nothing. A man brought her bags up and set them down on the platform. There were three of them.

Steve picked them up. He said, "Only one hotel in town, Miss Cotter. Not like Eastern hotels, but it won't be too bad. Kent said to tell you he'd drop in tonight."

"Kent left quite a few instructions," Abbey Cotter observed a trifle coldly. "Are there any more?"

"Reckon not, ma'am." Steve smiled. "I'll take you up to the hotel now."

"I haven't eaten as yet," the girl told him.

"Dining room in the hotel," Steve said. "Reckon they can fix you up with a meal now."

"Is it customary for a lady in this town to dine alone?" Abbey Cotter asked sweetly.

Steve stared at her as they started to walk toward the buckboard. He wasn't quite sure yet what she was coming to, and he was hesitant about asking.

Abbey said, "Are you hungry, Mr.—?"

"McVane," Steve said. He stared straight ahead of him. "Reckon I can always eat, ma'am."

"Of course," Abbey said, "I shall expect to pay for my own meal, Mr. McVane, and under the circumstances it would not be entirely wrong if I paid for yours."

"Why?" Steve asked bluntly.

"For information furnished," Abbey said coolly. "You understand I'm new in this town."

Steve dropped the bags in the back of

the buckboard, and he was smiling a bit, liking this schoolteacher more and more. He said, "It's a deal, ma'am."

They drove the block up to the hotel, and as they came into the main street, Steve could feel the eyes on them, narrow, cold eyes, speculating eyes. He tied the sorrels to the hitching rack in front of the Grant Hotel, and he followed Abbey Cotter into the lobby, carrying the bags.

The desk clerk smiled genially as the girl walked in. The smile vanished from his face when he saw Steve bringing up the rear. Setting the bags down on the floor near the desk, Steve moved away in the direction of the dining room off the lobby. It was not much of a lobby, a square room, pine boards, natural finish, a big wood stove in the center of the room, a half dozen chairs scattered around. A stairway led to the second floor of the building.

Steve was standing in the entrance to the dining room when Abbey Cotter joined him. An old man took her bags up to her room after she'd registered. She said as they walked to a table:

"You're not too popular in Broken Bow, Mr. McVane."

Steve smiled. "That's so," he admitted. He pulled out a chair for her at a corner table. He saw the waitress in the dining room staring at him coldly as he sat down and picked up the menu.

Abbey didn't say anything until they'd given their order and the girl had gone. Then she said, "Did you know my uncle, Les Allman, Mr. McVane?"

"Saw him once," Steve said. He was interested in the menu.

"Who shot him?" Abbey Cotter asked.

Steve surveyed over the top of the menu. He said tonelessly, "This town says I did."

Now it was Abbey Cotter's turn to lift her eyebrows. There was a puzzled expression on her face as she took off her gloves. She said, "Did you?"

Steve McVane sat back in the chair. "Reckon I don't usually shoot people I don't know," he murmured.

She looked at him steadily for several moments, and then she said, "That's the reason everyone seems so suspicious of you. I saw the men on the porch looking at you strangely, the desk clerk, and this waitress. Why do they think you did it?"

Steve shrugged. "I work for Kent Allman," he stated. "Signed up with Kent the day before his uncle was shot down up on Logan's Bluff." He didn't say any more.

Abbey Cotter said impatiently, "That's no reason why they should suspect you of murdering Mr. Allman."

Steve studied his hands. They were small hands, well-proportioned, tanned, strong hands. He said, "Broken Bow knew there was bad blood between Les Allman and his nephew. They'd had arguments before. They figured Kent was bringing in a hired gunman to put his uncle out of the way so that Bar A would fall in his lap."

"Hired gunman," Abbey Cotter said slowly, and she was staring at Steve intently now.

"That's the talk, ma'am," Steve said in his curiously detached way. He grinned a little and he added, "Reckon I earned my supper, ma'am."

"So you're a hired gunman," Abbey murmured. "I've heard of such people."

Steve put both hands flat on the table. "I'll get on back to the ranch," he said. "I'll tell Kent you're here."

"You don't have to go," Abbey told him. "Now what was the real reason you signed up with Bar A?"

Steve looked at her steadily. "Kent Allman figured he was in danger and wanted a little protection," he said. "He heard of me over in Central City where he was delivering Bar A beef."

"What was Kent afraid of?"

"Ask him," Steve countered.

ABBEY frowned and looked down at the table. "I received a letter from Mr. Hudson," she said, "and another note from Kent Allman, telling me of the death of my uncle. Kent and I are the only living relatives. Mr. Hudson said the will would be opened after I arrived. That's all I know about it."

"You should know this," Steve told her. "Mr. Allman was shot from the front, and he had a gun in his hand when they found him."

"What does that mean?" Abbey asked curiously.

"In this part of the country," Steve observed, "they don't call that murder, ma'am. Reckon they'd say Les Allman was a trifle slow on the draw."

Abbey moistened her lips. "It would be considered murder, though," she said quietly, "if a—professional did the job, wouldn't it?"

Steve McVane looked at her. "Reckon it might, ma'am," he drawled. He drummed with his fingers on the table, and he said, "Anything else you'd like to know, Miss Cotter?"

"Did my uncle have many enemies?" Abbey asked him.

Steve shrugged. "Bar A is the biggest ranch on the bench," he stated. "Every big man steps on the toes of some little men in order to get where he is. Reckon there would be people who didn't like him too much, but I'd say he was popular in this town."

"Why didn't Kent like him?" Abbey asked.

Steve McVane smiled. "Ask him," he said again.

Abbey frowned. "You're loyal," she said.

Steve shrugged. "Right now," he stated, "Bar A is my brand. Kent is running Bar A until that will is read. Kent Allman pays my wages."

They ate in silence when the food was brought out, and then Abbey Cotter said, "I didn't come out here particularly for money, Mr. McVane. I—I was curious. I'd never been more than a hundred miles from Boston in my life, and I thought I should come out."

Steve nodded, and he had his picture of this girl, teaching school, probably a fashionable school in or around Boston, receiving the letters from Craig Hudson and Kent Allman, asking her to come out. She evidently hadn't realized that her uncle's large estate represented a small fortune.

"I met my uncle once when I was eight years old," Abbey was saying. "He seemed tremendously big."

"He was a big man," Steve observed. He wasn't listening too carefully because something was going on outside on the porch. He could see through a window across the dining room. He could see the road and the buildings across the way.

A half dozen riders had come in. They'd dismounted in front of the Buckaroo Saloon opposite the hotel, but they hadn't gone inside. They were standing on the porch near the batwing doors, and they were looking across at the hotel. They'd seen the buckboard parked outside, and they'd read the brand of the horses in the traces.

They were from the Anchor Ranch, Bar A's neighbor. Steve could see the Anchor branded on the hip of the horses at the tie rack. There were five of them in the group; dusty, tanned men just in off the range.

As Steve watched he saw the redheaded wagoner he'd met at the station come out of the saloon, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve. The redhead paused, looked at the five Anchor riders, and then said a few words to them, nodding toward the buckboard.

The Anchor riders were all turned, looking at the buckboard, and then in-

stead of going into the Comanche they drifted across the road to the hotel porch, walking slowly, easily, some of them with their hands hooked in their gunbelts. Their leader evidently was the big yellow-haired man in the lead. He wore a calf-skin vest, and he had his gun strapped on the left hip.

Abbey Cotter said suddenly, "What's the matter, Mr. McVane?"

Steve smiled. He knew that she'd been following his eyes as he kept the five Anchor men in sight, and she'd read something in his face. He said easily:

"Reckon I'll get on back to the ranch. Have to tell Kent Allman about his mistake."

"Mistake?" Abbey repeated.

"He figured you were a schoolteacher, ma'am," Steve said.

Abbey Cotter was looking at him steadily, and then a little color came into her face. She said, "Oh."

Steve finished his coffee and reached for his hat. He'd noticed that the five Anchor riders were now out on the hotel porch directly between himself and the buckboard. He'd have to pass through them to reach the wagon. Their presence, too, seemed to have attracted quite a lot of attention. Several shopkeepers had come out of their stores across the road and were looking at them.

The local law man, Thorpe Flynn, rode by on a buckskin horse, his silver star gleaming in the late afternoon sunshine. Flynn was a lean man, thin-shouldered, one shoulder higher than the other, which gave the impression that his head was cocked to one side as if perpetually listening for something. He had a thin, aquiline nose, and sharp green eyes.

Flynn looked at the five Anchor riders, and then at the Bar A buckboard in front of the hotel. Thorpe Flynn took it all in, and he kept riding by, slowly, deliberately. Steve McVane could almost read the man's mind.

Give it to him, Flynn was thinking.

Abbey Cotter rose from the chair. Steve had picked up the bill, and shaken his head firmly and definitely when she started to object. She said:

"Thank you for the dinner, Mr. McVane. I suppose I'll see you out at the ranch."

"Reckon I'll be there," Steve nodded. He saw her eyes move to the gun at his hip again. She didn't say any more.

At the desk he paid the bill as Abbey went up the stairs to her room. The clerk said meanly:

"Some friends waiting for you on the porch, McVane."

Steve looked at him. "That so?" he said. He rolled a cigarette as he stood by the desk, lighted it, and then moved toward the door. The clerk called after him softly:

"Good-by, Mr. McVane."

CHAPTER

2

Threat of the Law

Steve was smiling a little as he stepped out on the porch. The five Anchor riders were spread out in front of him, two on each side, lounging near the porch pillars. The big yellow-haired man sat on the top step of the porch, one leg drawn up, a cigarette in his mouth, tilted toward the ceiling.

He was looking straight ahead of him as Steve sauntered out toward the edge of the porch, preparatory to going down the steps. He stopped quite abruptly just as he reached the edge of the porch. The yellow-haired puncher had let his long leg slide out soundlessly, and if Steve had continued he would have tripped over the leg and plunged down the three steps to the board walk.

There was no sound for one long moment. The four Anchor riders watched Steve carefully. The spectators across the road waited breathlessly, and then Steve

McVane suddenly kicked out with his right boot, catching the Anchor man in the calf, driving the extended leg around so that he almost lost his seat on the top step. With almost the same movement he lashed out with his left hand, slashing the man's hat from his head.

The Anchor rider yelped from the pain of the kick. He scrambled to his feet, face tense. He was a bigger man than Steve, heavier in the shoulders. He was younger, too, in his early twenties, and he'd lived too few years to heed the voice of caution. He said bitterly:

"Reckon you wouldn't be so tough, mister, if it wasn't for that gun."

Steve McVane looked at him, smiled a little, and then went down the steps toward the buckboard. He walked around the horses to the seat, and they thought he was riding away. The yellow-haired man was about to say something, and then he stopped. Steve was unbuckling his gun-

belt, draping it calmly across the seat. He came back up on the walk, and he said gently:

"Ready, friend?"

The Anchor man came down the porch steps, grinning confidently. He'd slipped off his gunbelt, too, and handed it to one of the other riders. He said tauntingly, "Come an' get it, McVane."

Steve tore in at him, low, hard, a savage wildness about that first drive which took the younger man by surprise. Three times Steve hit him solidly in the stomach, backing him up against the porch railing, swinging viciously, never slowing down.

The crowd started to gather. They came out through the hotel doors; they raced from saloons along the main street. They crowded the hotel porch. A man yelled: "Get him, Buck!"

Buck fought desperately to get away from the porch railing where Steve had

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pinned him. He was bleeding from the mouth, and his right cheek was cut. He started to hit out at Steve's face, landing several times, but the punches seemed to have no effect.

Steve caught him with a left swing high on the head, and he staggered away from the porch, nearly falling on the boardwalk. Darting after him, Steve continued to hammer, smashing him up against the tie rack, making it creak ominously.

The Anchor rider snorted, spat blood, and lunged in at his man. He tried to punch hard and steadily, but he couldn't match the fury of Steve's attack, and gradually his strength started to wane. He kept retreating along the walk down through the lane of watching, grim-faced spectators, all the way to the corner, a distance of about fifty feet.

He stumbled to his knees once, and got up cursing, his face badly battered now, bleeding from a half dozen cuts. Steve's mouth was bleeding, too, and the blood dripped down to his gray flannel shirt. He didn't seem to notice it. He'd lost his hat, and his black hair was mussed. On his face was that same taunting smile, but his eyes were hard, a kind of veil across them.

At the corner he smashed the yellow-haired man on the chin and then swung hard and full to the stomach. It was the end. The Anchor rider fell away, his mouth open, gasping for air, agony distorting his face.

He dropped into the dust of the road and lay there, clutching his stomach with both hands, rolling back and forth. Steve looked at him for a moment, and then turned and went back up the walk.

As he was picking up his hat where it had fallen off, he glanced up and saw Abigail Cotter watching him from the porch. She was pale, and she was clenching her hands tightly, but she smiled at him, and he nodded back.

Steve put his hat on, held his handkerchief to his bleeding mouth, and walked out to the wagon, the crowd watching him silently. They watched him strap on the gunbelt, climb to the seat, and turn the horses out into the road. He drove off that way into the sunset.

At the next corner a thin, gray-haired man in black frock coat, clean white shirt and polka-dot cravat, watched him go by, nodding his head slightly. His shoulders were a little bent; his gray mustache drooped. The man was Craig Hudson.

Staring straight ahead of him as he drove out of Broken Bow, Steve was thinking of this man's story as he'd heard it from Kent Allman. Hudson was a widower, a highly-respected citizen of Broken Bow, and the town's only lawyer. He'd had an only daughter, a really beautiful girl by the name of Clarissa. The night Les Allman was shot she'd run off with a young puncher by the name of Bud Henderson from the Running W Ranch. Broken Bow thought the elopement had broken Craig Hudson's heart. He no longer played cards in the back room of the Comanche Saloon. He seemed to be deliberately avoiding people.

Two miles west of Broken Bow, Steve turned the team in under an arched cottonwood pole entrance way which led to the Bar A Ranch. The horses, glad to be near home, broke into a sharp trot as they went up the trace of a road. They slowed down near the top of a rise, and then moving over the ridge Steve could see Bar A spread out before him—the large one story frame building, U-shaped with two wings built on to it, several barns and stables, a huge corral, the long shed-like bunkhouse large enough to accommodate fifty riders.

IT WAS nearly dusk when he drove up to the barn, and the old man, Cliff Howlett, came out to take the horses. Cliff was carrying a lantern. He held it

up as Steve came down off the seat, stared at Steve's puffed face, his swollen mouth, and whistled softly. He didn't say anything.

"Bag of flour in the back," Steve said. "Cook wanted it."

He went on up to the house, seeing the yellow light in the office of the main building, knowing that Kent was in there, going over the books again. He went into the house, banging the screen door deliberately so that Kent would know he was coming.

He crossed the living room, an immense room with a huge fireplace, and a deer head above it. There was a piano in one corner, the shining wood reflecting the light of the lamp on the table nearby. The rugs on the floor were rich, luxurious. The furniture was in good taste, and there were pictures and Navaho rugs on the walls.

Walking over to a door leading off the living room, Steve knocked. Kent Allman called from inside:

"Come on in, Steve."

Steve pushed through the door. Kent was sitting at a big, oak rolltop desk, with several heavy, leather-bound ledger books scattered around him. There was a lamp on the table, flooding the books and papers in front of the man, casting huge shadows on the walls of the little room.

Kent Allman was in his late twenties, built somewhat on the lines of his uncle, not as big, but a big man; brown-haired, brown-eyed, heavy in the jaws. Kent said, "Well." He looked at Steve more closely in the lamplight, and he said softly, "Well."

"Ran into a chap by the name of Buck in town," Steve explained. "Reckon he wanted to see how tough I was without a gun."

"How tough were you?" Kent grinned. He had good teeth, strong and white.

"I could walk when it was over," Steve observed. "Buck couldn't."

"That'll be Buck Wilkins," Kent said thoughtfully. "So they're still after your hide."

"Why not?" Steve said.

"I've established the fact with Thorpe Flynn," Kent scowled, "that you and I were up in Elder Canyon chasing wild horses the afternoon my uncle was shot."

"This town," Steve said, "don't believe me and they don't believe you."

Kent stared at the books, a frown on his face. He said suddenly, "What about my dear cousin? She at the hotel?"

Steve nodded. "She's there," he said. "Told her you might stop in tonight to see her."

Kent Allman grimaced. "The schoolteacher," he said.

"The schoolteacher," Steve murmured, "is damned pretty, and very young."

Kent stared at him. He said, "No!"

"Have a look," Steve said. He sat down on a chair in a corner and he started to roll a cigarette. The knuckles of his hands were bruised from the fight, and there was still a little blood on them.

"She would have to be my cousin," Kent Allman chuckled. "What did she have to say?"

"Reckon she thought Bar A was a two-by-four shack with a dozen cows in the back," Steve observed. "She came out to see the West."

Kent Allman grinned. "If my uncle left her Bar A," he observed, "she inherits fifteen thousand head of prime beef—according to the books—and it'll be higher than that at fall round-up."

"Why would he leave Bar A to her?" Steve asked curiously. "He didn't know her."

Kent shrugged. "If I knew my uncle," he stated, "blood meant an awful lot to him. That's the reason he took me in two years ago, even though I didn't live here as a close relative in any sense of the word. I worked for him, and I earned my wages the same as any bunkhouse rider he

had on the payroll, but we weren't close."

"This town says you didn't get along with your uncle," Steve observed.

Kent Allman looked at him steadily. "We didn't get along," he admitted. "Maybe it was because we were alike in a lot of ways. We're both rather bull-headed in some things. We had words, even in public, and people knew that we didn't care too much for each other. I was about ready to quit when he was shot."

Steve McVane lit his cigarette and puffed on it thoughtfully. "Why did you sign me up?" he asked.

Kent Allman swung around in his chair, shoved his hands in his vest pockets and frowned. "When I ran across you over in Central City you looked tough, and I needed somebody tough around."

"Why?" Steve asked bluntly.

"I was afraid of being shot in the back," Kent said grimly. "Maybe I was wrong, but I was afraid of that. Figured I needed a little protection when I went around."

"Would your uncle shoot you in the back?" Steve asked.

Kent scowled. "I don't know," he confessed. "He was tough and he was ruthless, and I knew something about him which was not so pleasant. He may have gone a long way to stop me from talking."

"None of my business," Steve said, "what that was about."

"He's dead," Kent said briefly. "We'll forget it." He got up, reached for his hat on the peg near the door, and said, "I'll drive in to see Cousin Abigail."

"Calls herself Abbey," Steve murmured.

Kent looked at him. "You got along pretty well," he said.

"Fair." Steve smiled faintly.

He walked over to the bunkhouse when they were outside, and he heard Kent Allman riding away. Several Bar A riders lounged on a bench outside the bunkhouse. Steve could see their cigarettes glowing in the darkness; he could hear the low hum of their talk. This stopped when they

heard him coming near the bunkhouse.

He had no doubt they'd already heard of the fight. There would have been a Bar A man in town somewhere while the fight was going on, and he'd have gotten back to the ranch by now.

Walking past the group at the door, not even looking at them, Steve entered the bunkhouse. A card game was going on at the table, five men playing and three more watching. They looked up at him, but no one said anything. He knew where he stood in this bunkhouse. Big, bluff Les Allman had been popular with his crew. He'd always shown his better self to them and to the town. Apparently only Kent Allman knew about the other half.

Moving past the table and the card players, Steve McVane wondered what it was that Kent had found out about the uncle. It had undoubtedly been a serious matter if Kent suspected that his uncle would bring in a professional gunslinger to take care of him.

SITTING on the edge of the bunk at the far end of the long bunkhouse, Steve smoked his cigarette through. He could hear some of the talk at the card table, the low monosyllables of the poker game, and then one of the spectators at the table said casually, in a voice loud enough so that Steve could hear it:

"Understand Thorpe Flynn brought in two deputies today. You boys see 'em?"

A short man by the name of Joe Weaver, a wrangler, said, "Reckon they look like a pair o' Texas gun-throwers to me. Where in hell did Thorpe get 'em?"

A man at the table, his back toward Steve said significantly, "Maybe Central City. That damned town's full o' cheap gunhands."

Steve got up. He had to get up because one remark like this permitted to pass by meant that there would be more. He'd discovered that from past experience. When a man went on the defensive, he was al-

ways on the defensive, and he was no longer a man but a mouse.

They heard him coming; they heard his boots on the planked floor, and the talk stopped abruptly. Little Joe Weaver cleared his throat noisily. Another man elaborately went through the motions of rolling a cigarette, but he spilled some of the tobacco on the floor.

Steve stopped a few feet from the table. His hat was on the back of his head. He had the bit of cigarette in his mouth yet, and his hands were hooked in his gunbelt. He said softly:

"Somebody mention Central City?"

Joe Weaver stared hard at the card table. "We were talkin' about Thorpe Flynn," he said woodenly.

Steve nodded. "Must be hearin' things," he said softly. "Thought you mentioned Central City." He paused, tossed the cigarette through the open door, and added, "Nice town, Central City. I come from there. Hate like hell to hear people talkin' it down."

No one said anything. Steve McVane stood there, letting the seconds tick by, saying nothing, doing nothing, letting the pressure build up on these men. He saw the nervousness come into their fingers as they handled the pasteboards. Twice one of the players picked up a card and dropped it. He cursed softly.

Steve laughed, softly, deep down inside of him, and then he turned around and

walked back to his bunk. He lay down and went to sleep in five minutes. . . .

Kent Allman, who'd always eaten in the bunkhouse with the men, and who still ate there now, said at the bunkhouse table, "You boys will know after one o'clock this afternoon who you're working for." He glanced across at Steve, and he said, "Mr. Hudson will open the will at that time."

The men ate in silence. Nat Diamond, a veteran Bar A Man, said vehemently: "Damn if I'll work for a woman."

"She doesn't have Bar A yet," Kent said dryly. Outside, lighting up his pipe, he said to Steve, "they have me out already, Steve. They don't think Uncle Les left me a nickel." He grinned and he said, "Damned if I think he did, myself."

"What happens to you?" Steve asked him, "if Miss Cotter takes over Bar A?"

Kent shrugged. "I came from California to see how things looked out this way and to see my uncle. I can always go back to California."

"You meet her last night?" Steve wanted to know.

Kent smiled. "I don't mind losing Bar A to her," he said.

They rode in to Broken Bow, and Steve waited in the lobby while Kent went up to get Abbey Cotter. When she came down she gave Steve a ready smile, and he found himself very glad that he'd ridden in with Kent.

He said, "Afternoon, Miss Cotter."

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She was wearing a cool white dress, and her brown hair was done up a little differently than when he had first seen her. She looked younger, prettier. She said, "The loyal Bar A hand."

Kent grinned. He said, "We have ten minutes, but we might just as well go over and have a chat with Mr. Hudson while we're waiting."

"Mr. Hudson is the executor of the will?" Abbey asked.

"That's right," Kent nodded. "Craig Hudson was our uncle's best friend. They've played cards together for years." They were walking toward the street door now, and he said, meditatively, "There were three of them, and they played twice a week in the back room of the Comanche."

"Who was the third man?" Steve asked.

"Doc Baisley," Kent said, and he looked at Steve. "Why do you ask?"

Steve shrugged. "Always check up on a dead man's friends," he murmured.

Abbey Cotter said, "I've heard some talk in the hotel today about Craig Hudson. I understand he had a daughter, and that she was quite beautiful."

Steve McVane saw Kent frown a little as they turned up the street in the direction of Hudson's office.

"Girl by the name of Clarissa," he said quietly. "She ran off with a rider from the Running W. She was quite pretty."

"This rider from Running W edge you out?" Abbey asked laughingly.

Kent smiled faintly, almost grimly it seemed to Steve. "Not me," he said.

Craig Hudson was waiting for them in his office, and for the first time Steve had a good look at the man. He was very thin, and this afternoon something seemed to be agitating him. A cigar was only half smoked on the desk. He got up and walked to the window twice while he was talking with them, and he kept glancing up at the clock. He spoke rather rapidly, nervously. He said:

"About a year ago Mr. Allman appointed me executor of his will. He'd had a close call at a spring round-up. I believe he was thrown from a horse or something, and he thought it was about time he put his affairs in order. He left his will with me. It has been in my safe ever since."

Kent said agreeably, "As my uncle's best friend and the only lawyer in Broken Bow, I guess he didn't have much choice in the matter."

Hudson nodded. He glanced at Steve, who had dropped into a chair in a corner and was looking out the window. Then Hudson looked at Kent Allman questioningly. Kent said:

"McVane's all right. I'd like to have him here while the will is being read, if Miss Cotter has no objections."

"No objections," Abbey Cotter smiled.

CRAIG HUDSON picked up an envelope on his desk. Steve noticed that it was sealed with red sealing wax. The lawyer broke the seal, slipping from the envelope a legal-looking document. He sat down at the desk and he started to read it.

Kent Allman sat on a chair near the wall. Abbey Cotter occupied another chair closer to the desk. Their faces were expressionless as they listened, and then as Craig Hudson went on Steve saw the look of utter amazement slide across Kent's face.

Hudson had come to the most important clause in the will. He was reading steadily in a rather low voice:

"All of my property, real and personal, shall be divided into two equal parts, and the parts bequeathed as follows:

A—To my niece, Abigail Cotter of Boston—one half.

B—To Thorpe Flynn, Sheriff of Broken Bow—one half."

The lawyer stopped reading. He was looking at the document. Kent Allman burst out:

"Thorpe Flynn! How could—?"

Craig Hudson handed him the document coldly. He said, "Mr. Allman, I am only the executor of this will. I did not write it up. I believe your uncle was acquainted with Mr. Flynn."

"Acquainted," Kent said dazedly, "but that's all. Why—?" He stared at Steve and then at Abbey Cotter.

"Isn't that your uncle's writing?" Mr. Hudson asked quietly.

Kent looked at it again. "I'd say it was," he admitted, "but I don't understand this. It's not that I was expecting anything, but of all men, why Thorpe Flynn? Why not—why not yourself, Mr. Hudson? You were a close friend of my uncle's, not Flynn."

Mr. Hudson shrugged his slim shoulders.

He seemed very weary, as if he'd just gone through an ordeal and it had weakened him physically. He said, "I never coveted any of your uncle's estate, Mr. Allman. I believe Les had a right to do with his property as he saw fit."

Abbey Cotter said slowly, "Does this mean I'm in partnership with the sheriff of Broken Bow?"

"That's what it means," Kent told her. "You and Flynn own Bar A. I suppose our uncle presumed one of you would sell to the other."

Steve McVane spoke from the corner, his voice soft, reflective. He said, "Or one would just take from the other."

Abbey looked at him. "What does that mean?" she asked.

"You're new to this country," Steve said. He got up from the chair, looked at Craig Hudson, who was watching him steadily, and headed for the door. He called over his shoulder, "I think somebody should tell Flynn about this—if he doesn't know about it already."

He saw the blood rush up into Craig Hudson's face, and for a moment, as he paused by the door, he thought the lawyer was going to say something. Hudson

didn't. His lips were clamped tight, and the color left his face. He was gray now, gray as the mustache on his upper lip.

Thorpe Flynn wasn't far away. Steve spotted him standing in front of the Pioneer Saloon, two doors down from the lawyer's office. He was chewing on a toothpick, and he was not alone. His two deputies sat back against the wall of the saloon, their chairs tilted, watching Steve carefully. He had them labeled with one look. They were the ruthless wolves of the border towns, professional killers; lean, thin-faced men, with a kind of contemptuous expression on their faces.

Both of them wore silver stars on their vests, and they carried big Colt guns on their hips. One man was rather young, but only in years, a tawny-haired chap with a drooping lower lip and smoky blue eyes.

The second man was older, dark-haired. He had a brutal, thin-lipped mouth, a nose flattened against his face. He was smoking a cigar, and he kept pushing the chair away from the wall, letting it fall back again with a gentle jar.

Steve slowed down as he drew near to Flynn. He'd never spoken to the man, but he'd seen him around, and Thorpe Flynn knew him. He said softly:

"Congratulations, Flynn."

"On what?" Flynn asked him. He spoke with a kind of nasal twang, and he was smiling as he spoke.

"I'd say," Steve stated, "that you just hit the jackpot."

"Did I, though?" Thorpe Flynn murmured, and the humor was in his green eyes, deep down, a sardonic humor.

He knew, Steve thought. He knew it all the while.

"You talk in riddles," Flynn said easily. "What's the joke, McVane?"

"I might find out some day," Steve told him.

"You might find out this," Flynn observed. "You might find out who killed

Les Allman one of these days, Steve."

"I might find that out, too," Steve nodded.

"And when you do," Flynn murmured, "you might find that this town is too hot for you, McVane."

"Look for me when that happens." Steve smiled evenly at him. "I'll be around, Flynn."

He passed on into the saloon. When he pulled up at the bar and looked into the bar mirror, he saw Flynn stepping away from the porch, heading in the direction of Craig Hudson's office.

Steve frowned at himself in the mirror. When the bartender came up, he said, "Beer, and where does Doc Blaisdell live?"

"One block north," the bartender told him, "turn right, second house from the corner. Little white house with a fence in front. Only damned fence in town."

CHAPTER

3

Double Treachery

Steve nodded. He downed the beer, paid, and walked outside. The two deputies were still sitting against the wall of the building. Walking past the older man, who was sitting on the right side of the doorway, Steve deliberately kicked at the rung of the chair with his boot.

The deputy yelled as the chair fell backward and he hit the porch floor with a bang. Steve stepped back, swinging around so that he faced both men. He was smiling, but he said apologetically:

"My fault, friend. Didn't see that chair."

The gunman rose to his feet, his face a dull red. He looked at the other man who had gotten up from his chair and who was watching Steve closely.

"Last man I want to cross," Steve McVane said softly, "is the man with the star. It won't happen again, mister." The words were apologetic, but he was still smiling broadly.

For one long moment the man he'd knocked down glared at him, and Steve stared at him steadily. Neither man said anything, and the pressure was upon Thorpe Flynn's deputy. He knew it, and Steve McVane knew it. Steve waited, and as the seconds flew by he knew that he'd won.

"Damn it. Be careful," the deputy rasped, and he was using words to vent his anger, mere words.

Steve's smile broadened, and the contempt came into his eyes, unveiled. He said softly, "Sure, my friend." He went down the steps.

Doc Blaisdell's house was small and white, one story high, very neat, with a little flower garden in front, the only one in town, also. He was treating an old man patient when Steve came in and sat down in the waiting room.

Doc Blaisdell called him in a few minutes later. He was a short, quick man, rather old, almost bald, with alert bright blue eyes. He wore spectacles and he peered through the spectacles at Steve, saying abruptly:

"Nothing at all wrong with you, young man."

Steve grinned. "Reckon that's right, Doc. Just a few questions."

"About what?" Doc Blaisdell demanded.

"You knew Les Allman and Craig Hudson," Steve said easily. "You played cards with them."

"Sometimes," Blaisdell observed cautiously. "Why?"

"Were those games for big stakes?" Steve asked.

Doc Blaisdell frowned. "Why?" he asked again.

Steve McVane opened his shirt pocket, took out a small leather folder and handed it to the physician. Doc Blaisdell opened the folder, stared at it for a moment, and then whistled softly. He said, "So."

"Now about those card games," Steve

said. "Did Hudson lose money—a lot of money?"

"Craig always liked to gamble," Doc Blaisdell said, meditatively. "I'd say that was his big weakness in life. As a lawyer he didn't make too much in this town, but he loved to sit in at a card game."

"And I'd say Les Allman liked to gamble, too," Steve stated. "Who did most of the winning in those games, Doc?"

"Allman always won," Doc Blaisdell said. "He had the big money to back him, and he could bluff and lose, and then bluff again for bigger stakes and win back twice as much. I used to drop out some nights, but I knew the two of them kept at it all night on occasions, and I'd say offhand that Craig Hudson may have lost a lot of money to Allman. I couldn't venture to say how much."

Steve thought about that. "Hudson and Allman were pretty good friends, you'd say?"

Doc Blaisdell looked at him. "They played cards together," he stated. "That's all I know about it. Sometimes when a man loses a lot of money to another man friendship flies out the window, if you know what I mean." He studied Steve sharply for a moment, and then he laughed. "If you're thinking, young man," he said, "that Craig shot Les Allman on account of gambling debts you're chasing a cold fish. Money never meant that much to Craig. I know him. He'd never kill for it, or kill to avoid paying anything he owed."

Steve frowned a little. "Reckon that's worth knowing," he said. "Thanks, Doc."

He went out, walked back to the main street, and then up in the direction of the hotel. The afternoon was hot and still. A rider came down the street, his horse kicking up a cloud of dust as he moved slowly past Steve.

Out in front of the hotel Kent Allman was talking earnestly with Abbey Cotter. Steve pulled up at the tie rack where he'd

tied up that afternoon coming in with Kent. He rolled his cigarette and he waited.

WHEN Kent spotted him he motioned him to join them. The big man's jaw was tight. He said when Steve came up: "How did you like that deal?"

Steve shrugged. "How long has Thorpe Flynn been in this town," he asked, "that he got to be such a good friend of your uncle's?"

"Six months," Kent Allman scowled, "and they never were good friends. Uncle Les knew him. That was about all. They may have had a drink at a bar once or twice, but I don't remember Flynn ever even being out to Bar A."

"How did he get to be sheriff of Broken Bow?" Steve wanted to know.

"Not too many men ask for a job like that," Kent stated. "Flynn came along. Had a little trouble with a Mexican herder in one of the saloons, shot him up some, and then a few of the leading citizens of the town thought he might be the man to wear the star in Broken Bow. The job was vacant, old Jim Bowden having resigned a few weeks before." He added, "Flynn is sheriff until election two months from now."

Steve looked at Abbey Cotter. "Meet your new partner?" he asked.

Abbey nodded and frowned. "I—I don't know what to make of it," she said quietly. "I'm really sorry Kent was left out of it." "Something wrong somewhere," Kent growled. "I'd like to get to the bottom of this."

"The will look all right to you?" Steve asked him.

"It was signed by Uncle Les," Kent told him, "and Craig Hudson witnessed it."

"It looked like Les Allman's handwriting, anyway didn't it?" Steve asked.

Kent stared at him. "What are you driving at?" he asked quickly. "Why

would Craig Hudson try to—to—,”

“Forge a will?” Steve asked softly. “I don’t know yet. You have any idea?”

“If he did forge it,” Kent said, “why give Abbey half of it? Why not the whole thing to Thorpe Flynn, if Flynn is the man getting it?”

“Reckon that might make it look too bad,” Steve observed. “If he only gave half of his property to Flynn people might wonder why, but they wouldn’t do anything about it. Everything might make for a lot of talk.” He added, looking at his cigarette, “There are ways Flynn can get the rest of Bar A from Miss Cotter. She’s an Easterner and doesn’t know anything about the cattle business. Maybe he figures he can force her out in a short while.”

“With Flynn half-owner now,” Kent said grimly, “that means I’m out. He won’t want me around.”

“I want you around,” Abbey Cotter said firmly.

Kent laughed. “That’s the way the trouble will start,” he said, “and Thorpe Flynn is the law in this town besides being part owner of Bar A.”

“He doesn’t have Bar A yet,” Steve observed.

Kent looked at him. “You heard the reading of the will,” he said. “What can stop him now?”

“We’ll talk about that,” Steve smiled. “You figure on going back to the ranch this afternoon?”

Kent nodded. “Have to pick up my stuff,” he said.

“Stay in town,” Steve advised him. “We might have a little business before the night’s over.”

Abbey Cotter glanced at him quickly. “You mean trouble?” she asked.

Steve shrugged. Kent Allman was staring at him, too, and then Kent said slowly, “I think I’m beginning to realize why Flynn hired those two gun-throwers to work with him. He’s going to back his play in this business.”

“If there is going to be any shooting,” Abbey Cotter said quietly, “I’d rather relinquish my share of Bar A and go back East. I don’t want anybody killed because of this property. It’s not worth that much to me.”

“Reckon I can promise,” Steve told her, “that nobody will be shot up on account of Bar A.” He touched his hat to the girl and he stepped back, looking at Kent.

“I’ll drop in and have a talk with you later,” Kent said.

Abbey went into the hotel, and Kent followed Steve into the Paramount Saloon, which adjoined the hotel. The bar was quite empty at this time, and they took a place at the far end of the room.

Kent Allman said, “What’s the mystery, Steve?”

“You ready to talk now,” Steve asked, “about that trouble you had with your uncle before he died?”

Kent looked at him and grimaced. He said slowly, “I guess you have a right to know. You appear to be in this thing to the hilt anyway. It was about Clarissa Hudson, Craig’s daughter.”

“She ran off with this Bud,” Steve nodded. “What about her?”

“My uncle was after her, too,” Kent said vehemently. “He intercepted her once in the hills above our place. She’d been out riding. I—I happened to come along. I believe Uncle Les would have married her, but Clarissa despised him. She was really in love with this Bud Henderson, and I was mighty glad to see them get off.”

“So your uncle was afraid you might go to Clarissa’s father with the story,” Steve said, “or even let it get around. He was a man of pride, wasn’t he?”

“He had a hell of a lot of pride,” Kent growled. “I think when Clarissa turned him down he was ready to eat nails.”

“And maybe even worse,” Steve frowned thoughtfully. “You don’t think

Craig Hudson knew about Les Allman, his supposed best friend, wanting to marry his daughter?"

"I don't know," Kent confessed. "I don't believe Clarissa would go to him with the story."

"Still," Steve mused, "Craig Hudson might have known, and that could have been a reason for his killing Les Allman."

Kent Allman stared at him. "Craig Hudson killing my uncle?" he gasped.

"I believe," Steve said, "that your uncle had a hold on him—possibly a financial hold. That would give Hudson another reason for having it out with Les Allman."

Kent Allman was staring at Steve now. He said slowly, "You're not the tough drifter I picked up in Central City. Who are you, McVane?"

Steve smiled and handed him the little leather folder he'd showed to Doc Blaisdell. Kent Allman stared at it for a moment, and then said softly,

"A Pinkerton man!"

"I've been on the tail of a man who participated in a Great Kansas R.R. robbery eighteen months ago," Steve explained. "Several times I almost caught up with him. I believe he's in Broken Bow now."

"Broken Bow?" Kent murmured. "You have any idea who he is?"

"Could be—Thorpe Flynn," Steve said. He fingered the glass the bartender had set before him, and then he poured two drinks. He said, "I was putting on an act in Central City. I had to come in to Broken Bow, but I couldn't ride in as a stranger because I might scare off the man I've been looking for. That's the reason I happened to be near you at the Buckaroo Bar in Central City. I knew you'd just come from Broken Bow."

"You bought me a drink," Kent grinned. "I remember that now." He thought a moment, and then he said, "Now you've got Hudson into this thing.

How does Thorpe Flynn fit into it?"

"We'll ask Hudson," Steve said simply. "He's the only one who can tell us." He pushed away from the bar, and Kent Allman followed him. Allman said, laughingly:

"You don't really think Hudson will talk! He'd be putting his head in a noose if he was the man who shot my uncle."

Steve shrugged. "It wasn't murder," he observed. "Your uncle had a gun, and he was shot from the front."

THEY went out on the street, moved up to the Bank Building, and Steve pushed through the door. Thorpe Flynn was coming down the stairs as they went up. He gave them a long, suspicious look, slowing down as they brushed past him. He said softly:

"Legal business, gentlemen?"

"We'll tell Hudson about it," Kent Allman said.

"Why not?" Flynn smiled, and he went down the stairs.

At the top of the landing, Steve said:

"Reckon you can tell Hudson who I am, Kent."

Kent nodded. They walked down the corridor, and he knocked on the door. Craig Hudson opened it. He looked at them, and stepped back so that they could come in. Kent said easily:

"A few questions we'd like to ask you, Mr. Hudson."

"Go ahead," the lawyer said stonily. He closed the door and walked over to his desk.

Kent said, "McVane here is a Pinkerton man, Mr. Hudson. I've seen his credentials. He'd like to ask the questions."

Craig Hudson's face seemed to grow more gaunt. He nodded and sat down behind the desk. Steve said to him abruptly:

"What was the reason you had for shooting Les Allman, Mr. Hudson?"

The lawyer put both slim hands on the desk in front of him. He didn't say any-

thing for several long moments, and then he took a cigar from a box and put it in his mouth. He didn't light it.

"The man I'm after," Steve said quietly, "is Thorpe Flynn. Does that help you, Hudson?"

Craig Hudson's eyes flickered. "It might," he said.

"We know," Steve smiled, "that the will was a forgery. We're willing to forget that part of it. Now where does Flynn fit into this picture? What do you owe him?"

Craig Hudson said clearly and distinctly, "Flynn saw me shoot Les Allman."

Steve heard Kent Allman's gasp, and then Hudson went on slowly, looking at Kent now, "Your uncle was not too good a man, Kent. I'm sorry to have to say that."

"I knew it," Kent said briefly.

"He wanted to marry my girl," Craig Hudson stated. "He tried to force me into arranging such a marriage. I—I owed him quite a large sum of money I'd lost at poker. He was holding that debt over my head, threatening to ruin me if I didn't talk to Clarissa."

"He was like that," Kent growled.

"In addition to that," the lawyer went on steadily, "he threatened to bring in a professional gunman to take care of young Bud Henderson with whom Clarissa had been going at the time. He'd have done it, too. I couldn't stand that."

"So you followed him out into the hills one day," Steve said, "and stood him up."

"He had a gun," Craig Hudson stated, "and I had one. I guess I was lucky."

"Now about Thorpe Flynn," Steve said. "How does he fit into it?"

"Flynn saw the shooting," Hudson said. "He was blackmailing me. Les Allman was popular in this territory for one reason or another. I would be through if it got around that I'd shot him. Besides, I didn't want Clarissa to know about it. She would know why I shot Allman, and she'd never get over it."

Kent Allman nodded. "I can understand that," he said. "Clarissa's a sensitive girl. So Flynn forced you into forging the will. What about the real will?"

"I still have that in my possession," Craig Hudson said. "The girl, Abigail Cotter, inherits all of Bar A." He added wryly, "You were left out, Kent."

Steve stood up. He said, "We'll see Thorpe Flynn now."

CHAPTER

4

Midnight Rendezvous

All of them heard the shot from the darkening street below. The plate-glass window was smashed by a bullet, and Craig Hudson, rising to his feet, slumped down in his chair again. He put his head down on his hands.

Steve leaped to the window, gun in hand. The lights were going on in Broken Bow. Directly opposite the Bank Building was the darkened Empire Ball Room, a dance hall, and next to the Empire was the Overland Saloon. There was an alley on the other side of the Empire, between the long, low shed of a building, and a saddlemaker's shop. The shot could have come from the alley.

Kent Allman had been examining Hudson. He called from the desk, "He's dead, Steve. That bullet got him through the heart."

Without a word, Steve glanced at the dead man slumped over the desk, and then he ran for the door, Kent Allman following him. They went down the stairs, burst out through the door, and crossed over to the alley, both men with guns drawn.

Several men had come out of the Overland and were staring up at the broken window in the lawyer's office. They looked at Steve and Kent as the two men plunged into the alley, stumbling among tin cans and refuse.

"If he was in here," Kent growled, "he'll be gone now, Steve."

They moved to the end of the alley and stood there, listening. They could hear nothing. When they came back to the mouth of the alley a crowd had gathered and was waiting for them.

Kent whispered, "Thorpe Flynn or one of his deputies. I'll gamble on that."

They saw Flynn pushing his way through the crowd, that one shoulder high as usual. He was saying, "All right—all right. What's the trouble here?"

Steve said laconically, "Mr. Hudson was shot, Sheriff. Somebody put a bullet through the window."

Flynn glanced up at the window. A man in the crowd called:

"Shot came from this alley, Sheriff. I heard it."

Flynn looked at Steve and Kent. He said, "You boys were with him."

"That's right," Steve nodded. He added gently, "We couldn't have done it."

Thorpe Flynn grinned at him. "Reckon that's right, McVane," he said. He stepped out of the crowd and headed across the road toward the lawyer's office. They saw him go in through the door and up the stairs.

Kent Allman looked at Steve. He said softly, "What about it now?"

Steve shook his head. "Flynn will fight when we put this thing up to him. Too many people around. He doesn't know who I am, and he doesn't know how much Craig Hudson told us, if anything. He can only guess."

Kent said suddenly, "That's Abbey standing out in front of the hotel, Steve. She heard that shot and she's worried. I'd better go down."

Steve nodded. He watched Kent walk off and cross the road. He was deliberating his own course when the shot rang out from a vacant lot close by the hotel. Kent Allman slumped in the dust of the road, his hat falling from his head. Steve heard Abbey's short scream, and then he darted into the alley out of which he'd just come.

Running hard, he reached the other end, cut around the rear of the Empire Dance Hall, and headed down toward the vacant lot on the next block. It was not quite dark yet and he could see clearly. A man was stumbling through the high weeds at the rear of the lot, coming directly toward him.

Slipping his gun from the holster, Steve slowed down to a walk, but he still came on, and then the man in front of him stopped. He'd slipped his gun back into the holster, but he started to bring it out now, his right hand moving very fast to his side.

The gun was coming up on a line with Steve McVane's body when Steve's gun roared twice. The man in front of him broke in the middle. He staggered forward, lurching crazily, clutching at his stomach with both hands, the gun falling from his fingers. He fell down less than a half dozen feet from where Steve was standing, waiting.

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He was still very quickly, and Steve went over, rolled him over, and struck a match. The dead man was the tawny-haired young deputy he'd seen on the porch that afternoon. His five-pointed star was still pinned to his vest.

Straightening up, Steve walked rapidly back to the main street. He saw several men carrying Kent Allman into the hotel lobby. Abbey Cotter was following them, her face white. When she saw Steve she said quickly:

"It—it's a bad shoulder wound. Doc Blaisdell is taking him up to my room."

"Stay with him," Steve said.

"Who shot him?" Abbey asked. "Why?"

"The man who shot him is already dead," Steve said quietly. He saw her looking at him, and then at the gun again. He said, "Kent will tell you about it later."

"Where are you going?" Abbey wanted to know.

"I have a little game to play," Steve smiled grimly. He took her by the arm and led her to the stairway, and then he skipped out through the rear door of the hotel.

In the darkness outside, he paused for a few moments, getting his bearings, taking stock of the situation. He knew very definitely now that Thorpe Flynn was determined to put him out of the way just as he'd had Craig Hudson and Kent Allman stopped. Flynn knew that the wealthy Bar A would not be his until he'd accounted for the men who stood in his way. There was little doubt in Steve's mind now that Flynn had always intended to put Hudson away. With Hudson, the man who'd forged the will, Flynn's claim to Bar A would always rest on dangerous ground until Hudson was dead.

Flynn now suspected Kent and himself to be in on the secret, and he was determined to get rid of them, too. He would never rest until he had. There was only

one choice left now. Steve thought about that. He'd been following Flynn for months hoping to learn who his accomplices were in the Great Kansas train robbery. He could no longer wait until Flynn tipped his hand. He had to close in on the man for good.

MOVING down along the rear of the hotel, picking his way carefully in the darkness, he came up behind a saloon which he figured to be the Happy Hour. He paused here, knowing that one slip now would be the end of the game. Thorpe Flynn and his deputy were hunting for him just as he was hunting for them, and they hunted in the alleys and the vacant lots. They shot from cover, and they shot to kill. If they saw him before he saw them he would be dead.

He walked on past the rear of the Happy Hour, across a vacant lot where a building had stood years before, but which had burned down, leaving a mass of charred timber overgrown with weeds.

Still moving behind the buildings along the main street, he passed several residential dwellings, and then another saloon, and then he was at the end of a small street which ran into the main street. There were a half dozen Mexican shacks at this end of the street which petered out on open rangeland.

Steve turned down the street, keeping close to the buildings, heading back toward the main street. He passed a man coming up, and he kept his hand on his gun until the man had gone by.

At the corner he stopped in the shadow of the last building, hugging the wall so that he could not be seen from the street. He could see the Pioneer Saloon across the way, men drifting into it, coming out again.

There were quite a few horses at the racks now in front of the various saloons, and Steve suddenly remembered that it was Saturday night, which meant that

many of the range riders would be coming in to have their fling.

A half dozen horsemen swept past him at the corner, their mounts kicking up dust. For a moment Steve tried to reason out Flynn's course of action. Undoubtedly, Flynn or his deputy had found the body of the man who had been shot down. They would have heard that second shot after Kent Allman was dropped. Now they would probably unite their forces and try to track him down together. They were searching for him exactly as he was searching for them, moving through the back alleys, watching the main street.

Crossing the road quickly, Steve entered an alley leading to the Ace High Livery Stable. He moved to the rear of the alley, skirted the stable, and was once again behind the buildings on the main street, but the opposite side of the street now.

The moon was swinging up and he could see quite clearly back here. He followed the line of buildings, passing by the vacant lot from which the deputy had shot down Kent Allman. He noticed that the body of the man was gone.

On a sudden hunch he turned into the lot, pushing through waist high weeds, moving up toward the street. He had come around the corner of an old abandoned shed, and he was about fifteen yards from the shed when he thought he heard a light movement behind him.

Instinctively, he dropped to his knees, flattening himself against the ground just as a gun roared behind him. He could hear the slug zip through the weeds above his head, and then Thorpe Flynn's sharp voice:

"Watch him, Ben."

Wriggling through the weeds, Steve moved about five feet in one direction, and then turned and crawled a dozen feet at right angles from this spot. Then he waited, his gun in his hand, lying on his stomach. He didn't want to shoot because he wasn't quite sure where Flynn was.

The voice and the shot had come from the corner of the shed, but it was possible that Flynn had moved since then.

Ben, the other deputy, had been hidden in the vacant lot watching the street, and he'd been a little ahead of Steve as he came into the lot. He probably hadn't moved since Flynn uttered the warning.

Scarcely breathing, Steve waited, knowing that the first move he made now would draw lead in his direction. The flash of his gun at one man would bring fire from the other. He was caught in a pocket.

Very carefully, he rolled over on his back and came up on both elbows, reclining that way in the high weeds. He turned his body so that he could command a view of the shed and of the street. He glanced up at the rising moon, and he frowned. As it came higher and higher he realized that the two men watching would sooner or later be able to spot him. They were waiting for that, holding their fire.

His right hand held the gun loosely, and his left lay on the ground. The fingers of his left hand came in contact with something smooth and cold, embedded in the ground. It was a smooth stone, and he caressed it gently with his fingers. It was loose in the ground, and he pried it up, smiling a little now.

Lifting himself to a sitting position, he turned so that his back was toward the shed and Thorpe Flynn. He kept his gun braced against his stomach and his shoulders hunched a little to hide the flare of the gun, and then he threw the stone through the weeds, dropping it about a dozen yards from where he was sitting.

A gun barked from a point about ten yards to his right, and he could see the orange flash. He fired at the flash, holding his gun steady, and he saw a man get up in the weeds, stand there for a moment, head bowed, and then lurch forward to fall again.

He braced himself, wondering whether Flynn would open fire in the general di-

rection of that shot, wondering, too, how much chance he had of hitting the target. Flynn didn't fire.

Steve relaxed a little. He swung his body carefully again so that he was now facing the little shed. He could see it outlined against the rising moon, the slanted roof, the straight edge of the corner. He couldn't see anything, and he was thinking that perhaps Flynn had already left the shed and dropped into the weeds where he was now hiding.

He had no way of telling, and he waited, watching the shed, watching the section of the lot about a dozen yards from the corner of the building. He glanced up at the moon, noting how rapidly it was lifting, flooding the lot with light, and he did not like this.

THE moon was directly above the edge of the shed roof, and as he watched he thought he saw a very faint movement on the rim of the roof. Stiffening a little, the gun tight in his hand, he studied the roof intently, and then he noticed that the outline was not as straight as it had been. There was a slight rise about two feet from the rear end of the building, a rounded rise, that very easily could be the head of a man protruding slightly above the rim of the roof, carefully watching the lot.

Steve lay very still as he moved his gun up toward the bump. He was not sure yet. If Thorpe had gotten up on the shed roof he was getting a very clear view of the lot, and from a raised position, enabling him to look down into the weeds. In a very short time, with the moon coming up higher, he would definitely be able to spot his man.

Lining his gun on that very slight rise, Steve waited. At this distance, even if the bump was Flynn's head pulled back from the edge of the roof, the target was a very poor one, and if he missed, Flynn could send a half dozen bullets into the weeds,

following the flare of the gun. He could not miss his target, for he knew it might prove fatal.

Steve kept his eyes and his gun on the bump, watching it intently, and then he saw it move slightly, and he was sure. He drew back the hammer of the Colt and he lined it on the target. This first shot was not going to hit his man, but it would undoubtedly bring Flynn's head up a little more. Flynn would have to lift himself slightly in order to get his gun over the edge of the roof and down on his target. The second shot, following the first, would have to go home or he knew he would be a goner.

Taking a deep breath, Steve squeezed gently on the trigger. The gun roared, and he held it steadily, watching that bump, and when it came up a few inches higher, he fired again, noting the flash of the gun on the roof.

He felt lead tug at his right arm, grazing the flesh, and then he waited. The rising moon revealed a huddled shape up on the roof now, sprawled out on the rim, and Steve watched the shape move. Suddenly Flynn hurtled over the edge of the roof. Steve heard the body hit the earth with a sickening thud, and he knew then he had gotten his man.

He got up then and he walked forward, clicking the empty shells out of his gun, reloading mechanically. When he struck a match, kneeling down beside Thorpe Flynn, he saw the bullet hole in the sheriff's forehead. He blew out the match, turned, and quickly walked toward the street.

The crowd had gathered at the first sound of the shots and they were coming out of buildings where they had taken refuge, gathering in front of the vacant lot. They parted when Steve pushed out through the weeds, and he walked through them across to the hotel.

Abbey Cotter was standing on the hotel steps, staring intently across at the lot.

The moon came up over the roof of a building across the way, and Steve could see her clearly. He saw the relief come into her face when she recognized him stepping up on the walk. He hastened to get to her side.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

She looked at him, standing below her, and she said steadily, "Everything's all right now, Mr. McVane."

Steve came up the steps. He said briefly, "Flynn is dead. He'd had Craig Hudson shot, and Hudson was the man who killed Les Allman."

"Flynn was the man you were trailing," Abbey said. "Kent told me about it."

They went into the lobby and they started up the stairs toward the room where Kent Allman had been taken. Abbey said:

"He's all right. Doctor Baisley got the bullet out of his shoulder. He'll be laid up for a while."

Steve nodded. "When he comes out," he said, "he'd make a good foreman for Bar A. I think he'd like the job very much, Abbie. You have all of Bar A, you know."

"I know," Abbey said. "I—I feel lost.

I'm just an Eastern school-teacher." She looked at him accusingly, and she said, "Why didn't you tell me you were a Pinkerton detective?"

They'd paused at the top of the landing and he was looking down at her, his hat in his hand. He said solemnly, "Teachers talk, ma'am, out of school."

Abbey frowned. "I wouldn't talk any more than any one else." She looked at him steadily, and she said, "What do you do now? I suppose you go back to headquarters."

Steve shook his head. "Not right away," he told her. "I have a few months off. Thought I'd stay around Broken Bow."

Abbey glanced at him quickly. "Not Broken Bow," she said. "Bar A. That's the least I can do for you. Will you come out?"

"Will it be proper?" Steve softly murmured.

Abbey Cotter smiled. "I think it'll be all right," she said.

Steve McVane knew that it would be, knew it very definitely, because there was a noticeable promise in Abbey Cotter's brown eyes.

Western

STORY ROUNDUP

TRIGGER PROUD

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● ● By WILL C. BROWN ● ●



"I'll take yours, too, Smiley," Clara
said firmly.

TWO white dust clouds, one lean-shaped and silent, the other roly-poly and cussing, rattled across the alkali shelf above the town of Flintrock. They moved in the worst heat of the July day when only fugitives from a rope party should have been riding in the boiling land. Which, indeed, was exactly why they rode.

"What's your hurry?" complained Toledo, who disliked hurrying under any circumstances. "A body'd think you was headed for a ice cream supper instead of a jail cell."

"You want to wait for that posse back there?" Smiley retorted sarcastically, above the hoof pounding. Smiley, stringy where his partner was pudgy and whose

*Hanging is a big event in any cowthief's life—and Smiley and Toledo
aimed to see that theirs was done legal.*

faded ranch clothes were as old, but cleaner, looked back over his shoulder for sign of pursuit.

"I never saw a sane man so hellbent to get in Sheriff Oglesby's jail house," Toledo puffed. "This mare has got the build of a porcupine—her bones stick up like a full-rigged schooner. Reckon we could slow down to an ordinary run?"

They were doing no more than an easy lope. But Smiley pulled up a little, out of sympathy. "If we don't get there before Oglesby closes his joint, we'll be fugitives. That means fair game for any jasper with more gunpowder than gumption. Bog Bullock will see to that."

"I'd almost as soon face Bullock and shoot it out," Toledo grumbled, "than this dang kangaroo court in Flintrock. Don't like bein' run off my own property."

Smiley had already weighed that pro and con, many miles back. With Bullock, their land-greedy neighbor, and his hand-picked sheriff, Oglesby, putting a hard-case posse on them, the frameup smelled like murder, any way he looked at it.

"You do like I tell you," Smiley said, riding with his knees while he rolled a delayed smoke, "and maybe we show this Bullock something. Now damn you, Toledo, don't you botch this thing."

"All right. You're the brains of the Bar O. It was you, you know, that thought up the cow swipe in the first place."

"You ain't fooling me," Smiley retorted. "You wouldn't run from that Bullock polecat a step farther than I would—you would have slipped in his house and fed him the butt of your Colt instead of hazing out those yearlings if I hadn't stopped you. Now let's go, bale of hay—don't make the court wait. That's contempt."

"Exactly the way I think."

"Well, keep it to yourself in front of Judge McCabe. C'mon. If this goes right I want to be straddle of a chair at the

Elite by sundown, putting away a T-bone as big as a saddle blanket."

"It ain't the T-bone you want," leered Toledo, "as much as it is who brings the T-bone. You just hunger to see Clara Thomas come smilin' out with the platter in her hands and eyes a-sparklin' like you was somebody come. What that educated waitress can see in a rawhide dogie nester like you is beyond me."

"There are," said Smiley frigidly, "so many things beyond you, my friend, that it is odd that you should pick only one random sample." He may have secretly agreed with his plump partner but he was not telling Toledo. Actually, he was wondering if everybody didn't think Clara had a special kind of smile and word for them, just like he was thinking. That was the kind of sparkling personality she had. Clara had come from the East and was really not a waitress. She was only helping her brother, Bud Thomas, who owned the Elite, and in no time at all she was the most popular young woman in Flintrock. The Elite's business had boomed remarkably since Clara's arrival. Smiley, in between the troubles he and Toledo worried with on their new homestead acres, liked to think that maybe Clara was just a fraction more friendly to him than any of the other cowpokes.

Flintrock, when viewed from the mesa rim below the Big Foot roughs, was about as ugly a town as the country about it. Being recently made a county seat had not helped its frame-shack, alkali-coated civic mug much, in Smiley's opinion. It was just a two-bit cowtown with a courthouse it didn't quite know what to do with yet. And a set of county officers who somehow had slid into their jobs after a confusing vote in that first election which nobody had exactly understood, since it was mostly bossed by Bog Bullock.

Riding down the slope into Main Street, Smiley checked back over everything in his mind. He didn't know what kind of a

reception he would get in that courthouse. Bullock might even have engineered a "dead or alive" deal. He hoped he had not overlooked any legal ambushes. There was an old law book at Bar O, a dog-eared volume he had picked up once in a bunkhouse. He had read it at stray intervals off and on, when there was nothing else to read. It used confusing language in places. But Judge McCabe, maybe, would be just as confused as he was.

Sitting comfortably, Sheriff Oglesby was dozing and dripping cigar ashes on his shirtfront. His feet were higher than his head, and he had to move his yellow boots a few inches aside before he could peer over with the hatpin eyes above the red hooked nose, to see who was calling. He almost swallowed the last of his cheroot.

What he saw was a lean man, frowning, with business in his eyes, and a short, dumpy one with a rising moon face and blistered bald head. The features, however, were secondary. The two sixguns in their fists were what brought the sheriff unfolding to attention and started a twin set of sweat drops in a race down the ugly terrain of his face.

"Where's Judge McCabe?" growled Smiley.

"A-a-across the hall," gargled Oglesby. "Don't point them things! Hell—it's Smiley and Toledo! I thought—"

"That we were strung up by now," Smiley finished for him. "Not yet, lawman. . . . Watch him, Toledo—he's gonna arrest us legal. Sit right there, Sheriff."

STALKING across the hall, Colt in hand, Smiley spotted old Judge McCabe likewise taking a late afternoon nap. The watery blue eyes lifted and the judge blinked, finally going into an apoplexy of awakening.

"Haircut?" he squeaked. "I mean—Smiley! What you—?"

"Come on, Judge, you're not a barber

any more," Smiley said shortly, waving his gun. "Across the hall! The judge did not hesitate. He went along in a bouncing hurry. Smiley followed and lined him up alongside the sweating Oglesby.

"Now then," Smiley felt a little taut by then and looked at Toledo.

"Justice," Toledo prompted.

"You got a county here," Smiley got going. "Court and everything. High time you started using it."

"We was bushwhacked," Toledo rumbled.

"Yeah. You let Bullock send a noose-crazy posse on us, Oglesby, just like we didn't have legal law here. Fine county you got, Judge, if they keep stringing up men whether they're guilty or not. All right—we dodged your fake posse, Oglesby, and now Judge we're here to face the charge legal. Trot out your warrant and set your bail."

"I—I thought you'd be running by now!" Sheriff Oglesby gasped. "Er—I mean, I told Bullock—"

"That's what Bullock thought, too!" Smiley's voice frosted up. "We caught one of his cutthroats hid out watching for us on our place. Only we saw him first and got the drop, and he'll be having a headache for some time. And that fine bunch of Bullock hired guns you call a posse—hell of a note, Judge, that the sheriff of your county sends out a crowd like that. All Bullock wanted them to do was catch us and string us up as cow thieves—plain murder."

"Mr. Bullock is a fine man," Oglesby licked his lips. "Leading rancher, helped organize the county."

"Haw-haw-haw," said Toledo, not laughing. "Why you old pet-bellied hypocrite, Bullock buys and sells you like beef."

"Now don't get disorderly, boys," Judge McCabe put in anxiously. He pushed back the wild white locks of his head and took a courtroom stance. "I'll

see that justice is done—we'll have no necktie parties in this county, not without fair trial. You hear that, Oglesby?"

"All right," mumbled Oglesby. "I thought Bullock's posse would only bring them in, unharmed."

"What's the charge?" demanded the judge.

"Cow stealin'," said the sheriff. "They drove fifty head of stock off Bullock's creek pasture."

"It's our pasture!" Toledo roared. "We got the papers!"

"You got a warrant?" McCabe asked Oglesby.

The sheriff fumbled at his desk and brought out documents. "I forgot to give 'em to Twist Gentry, that's Bullock's strawboss and head of the posse," he mumbled. "Yep, clean forgot it, Judge. But now these two got to go to jail."

"We'll make bond!" Smiley said crisply. "Set it, Judge."

"It'll take time," Oglesby objected. "You got to have security."

"A mortgage on our ranch will do."

"Got to get the mortgage made out," Oglesby countered.

"Got it in my pocket."

"Have to have a deed to the ranch."

"In my other pocket," said Smiley. "What else?"

"Well," the sheriff hawed, "we oughta see Bullock—he's the complainant. Says you two raided his creek pasture right under his nose and drove that stuff off his best grass."

"They were our stuff, in a round-about way," Smiley addressed the judge. "He took a bunch of our cows we had been grazing there. He's trying to force us to give up that good grass flat that borders his place—he thinks he still owns the whole damn range. We found our cows, drove them back, then his men took them again one night. We drove those cows back and forth so many times we dern near wore 'em out. Then they up and

plumb disappeared. Went to market, I think, when Bullock sent that big herd up the trail. So all we could do, Judge, was just to take those steers to make up for it. Bullock won't listen to reason."

"Bullock says different," put in the sheriff.

"Well, what have we got a court for?" demanded Toledo.

"He's right, he's right!" growled old McCabe. "Here—sign this, boys. That's your bond. Be in court Monday morning. Oglesby—dern your overstuffed hide, don't you ever send out no bunch of roughnecks on a lynching again, pretending it's a posse!" McCabe started out of the room.

"It's a fine howdy-do," called Smiley after him, "when a man has to come in to jail with his gun out to get justice in Flintrock County! But you stay in there and pitch, Judge—you got jurisprudence and To Wit on your side, including the Supreme Court and the President of the United States. The book says so."

"You dern tootin' it does!" The judge bobbed his white head approvingly and glared at Oglesby. "And I'm a gonna be judge or call out the Federals. First man that's contemptible, I'll hold him in contempt and put him so far back in state prison he'll look like a gopher when he comes out. Good afternoon, boys, good afternoon, Sheriff. *Habeas corpus.*"

"And *delicti* to you," said Smiley gravely. "You've got a real legal mind, Judge. You ought to run for state attorney general next."

The judge stalked out, waving his chin like a flag, head erect.

"Now the point of this," Smiley scowled at Oglesby, "is that we're legally under bond. You better get word out on that! First ambitious coyote on Bullock's payroll that tries to play like he's capturing a fugitive will get shot right back at, and the court will hold you responsible. You get me?"

"He's got it," growled Toledo. "But what've we got—except more trouble?"

"A date with a T-bone," said Smiley. "C'mon."

THEY holstered their guns and left the muttering sheriff, got their mounts and rode to the Elite on Main Street. Smiley led the way to a back table, eyes searching for Clara. When she came over he visibly brightened. Clara was an efficiently independent, golden-haired young woman, more than a match for the customers she attended in her brother's cafe. She was as good to look at as a spring morning after a thaw, and the way her blue eyes smiled and sparkled in her peach-fresh face with its ruby lips was prettier, as Toledo put it, than seeing an Indian chief in war bonnet falling with a paint horse off Rainbow Cliff at sunset.

"When you walked in," the observant Clara commented, "you two had looks uglier than Twist Gentry's thoughts. What's the matter? Bar O stock all drop dead or something?"

"Me and Toledo nearly did, out of one of our own trees," Smiley replied. "Twist Gentry been pesterin' you?"

"Not any more, said Clara. "I accidentally dropped a platter of soft scrambled eggs on his head."

Smiley's face went hard again, just at the thought of Twist. He was Bullock's chief gun handy and people were willing to let Twist strictly alone.

"We're in court," informed Toledo. "Wasn't satisfied to be hung lynch style. Now we gonna get it done legal."

Smiley told her, while they waited for the steaks to broil. Being Bud Thomas' sister, Clara let the other girl wait on the tables and took a chair with the Bar O pair.

"So Bullock took your stock, trying to crowd you out," she commented. "You found them and drove them back."

"Three times," nodded Smiley.

"So the last time, the cows being gone, you took the equivalent in yearlings off that creek grass?"

"It'll all come out at the trial," said Smiley. "Only we got no lawyer. No lawyers in Flintrock. It will be our word against Bullock and Oglesby and that whole hardcase outfit."

"You've got to have a lawyer, Clara said. "Otherwise it would be murder." She thought hard for a minute.

"I'll represent you!"

"Aw, Clara," protested Smiley, "you couldn't be a lawyer!"

"Why not?" the young lady demanded, eyes flashing in mounting determination. "I was on the debate club in high school back East. Debating is just arguing, and court trials are just arguing. I can argue. That's all a lawyer can do."

They pondered that. Clara lowered her voice, eyes downcast. "I—I wield a little influence around here," she said. "Might have an effect on the jury. And Judge McCabe's been a right steady coffee customer, too. One day he drank fourteen cups."

"You—you would do this for me—for us?" Smiley breathed.

"Let's say, for justice," she murmured.

"Let's say that's Twist Gentry comin' in the door this minute," mumbled Toledo, watching the front. "Mean-eyed as a bull in bobwire. Get ready, Smiley!"

Smiley pushed back and looked around, slow, and the ice that sometimes came into his voice when he was aroused was now freezing all over his creased face. Being a tall man, he seemed to come up in sections as a deathly quiet blotted out the usual clatter in the eatery. The frigid expression he wore, plus what was coming in the front door, paralyzed many a knife in mid-air.

Twist Gentry gritted triumphant words over his shoulder.

"There they are, boys—that last table! Go get 'em!"

Smiley registered the half-dozen rough maps of Bullock riders pushing in behind Twist. The hardcase delegation strung out and paraded down on him with boots thudding loud in the silence. Smiley could feel Toledo squaring away at his side, all set for his peculiar left-hand draw, and he could barely see the suddenly brittle look on Clara's unsmiling face.

Four paces out, Twist paused, his gun hand down tight on his leg beneath the black-butted Colt.

"You're under arrest! This is a posse legally deputized by the sheriff—come peaceful, both of you. Or we're taking you by force!"

"You're a shade late, Twist." Smiley talked with icicles when mad. "Toledo and me have already seen the sheriff. We're under legal bond. You can tell Bullock he knows what he can do with his posse."

The dark face of the crooked-mouth man showed he was digesting that and found it unsavory. His eyes whittled back and forth from Smiley to Clara. Mounting red tinged his skin.

"I'm under orders to arrest you," he muttered uncertainly.

"Twist," said Smiley, "I'll be in Judge McCabe's court Monday for trial. Me and Toledo." He saw that Twist was confused now, that he felt the unfriendly stares of the customers in the Elite. "So if you or Bullock got anything to discuss before then," Smiley relaxed a trifle and unbent a humorless grin, "you can see my lawyer." He turned and bowed to Clara.

"Why you—!" Rage boiled over in Twist Gentry, and he was bearing down on Smiley now, gun fingers working.

"No! No, Twist!" With quick movement, Clara Thomas threw herself between them, and to the consternation of the onlookers encircled Twist in her arms. Smiley gulped. Then Clara flung herself back, as quickly, and Twist's black-handled Colt dangled in her hand.

"I'll take yours, too, Smiley," she said firmly, and lifted Smiley's own gun. "Now you two can make conversation without getting hurt." She raised both guns in business-like motions. "And don't anybody else get notions—I can't shoot very straight but I sure shoot loud."

"Anything else, Twist?" Smiley murmured. The Bullock man was on the spot, and he knew the crowd knew it. Anger over-rode caution and Twist lunged at Smiley with fists pumping. The tall figure of the Bar O man seemed merely to sway to one side, but quicker eyes caught the swing that came up from the heels, heard the snap of Twist's chin, saw the gunman's head snap back. That was all. Smiley rubbed frayed knuckles and Twist sunk first to knees, then rolled over as in sleep.

Smiley's frigid eyes caught the big metal coffee urn across the opening of the back counter. In one movement he had Twist by the collar, dragging him over. "Put money on the counter, Toledo," he spoke quietly. "Enough for this whole tank o'coffee. I got to revive Twist. And don't let anybody get frisky."

Toledo's gun was in his left hand, waving at the open-mouthed Bullock riders. His right fumbled in his pocket, pulled forth currency. He threw it on the counter.

"Enough for the coffee," said Toledo. "And I'll personally clean up the mess."

Smiley arranged the inert Twist on the floor beneath the spout, lining up the bad man's back with the urn tap. Then he opened the handle wide, and the steaming black stream stabbed Twist like a branding iron.

The yelp, spectators said later, was heard beyond the Big Foot roughs, and all agreed Twist jumped within one foot of the Elite's high ceiling. Bud Thomas, who rushed out of the kitchen with a shotgun, bawled out Smiley, Twist, Toledo, Clara and everybody in sight, and the

way he waved the twelve gauge around immediately broke up the gathering. When all the confusion died down, Twist and his henchmen had shuffled out, Toledo was puffing and mopping the coffee off the floor while Bud supervised with shotgun still in hand, and Smiley was eating his T-bone, his chair pulled close to his new lawyer.

JUDGE McCABE'S sweltering courtroom was packed like a cattle car. Flintrock had turned out, serious about it's new county and court. The judge peered down from a high lumber bench, a proud white owl in a pine top. At a table sat Smiley and Toledo, with Clara Thomas between, trim in her bright new dress, her soft eyes smiling in turn at each of the twelve grave citizens on the jury. Less happy-looking, at the next table, sat Bog Bullock, Twist Gentry and Sheriff Oglesby. Bullock, beefy-built and solid jawed, prosperous in tan whipcord and Fort Worth boots, was shifting a thoughtful glance from jury to spectators. He appeared to be turning something over in his mind.

Smiley had already told his story. So had Toledo, under Clara's smooth prompting. They had related how Bullock first tried to buy their claim on the grass flats along the Bar O boundary, then began using uglier tactics. Bullock, in bullfrog voice, and the nervous Oglesby, also had made long-winded description of the yearling theft. Apparently they had thought it best not to put Twist Gentry on the witness stand.

If Bullock had felt confident that his hold on the county and his reputation would control judge and jury, he was beginning to show signs of losing that confidence. The jury, it looked like, had not seen or heard anything since the trial started—except Clara Thomas. Now Bullock was cutting worried eyes back to his men planted in the crowd.

Smiley caught that. So did Toledo, and Toledo leaned across to whisper to him in the courtroom lull. Smiley nodded and got to his feet.

"Ipso," he said.

"Facto," nodded McCabe. "Proceed, defendant."

"Your Honor," said Smiley, "Toledo smells a polecat."

"Such as what?" old McCabe quickly prompted.

"Such as violence in disrespect of the court," said Smiley. "There's a lot of guns in the audience." His words chilled up. "When this verdict is in, and Toledo and me are acquitted, like we're going to be, I want the honest people of Flintrock in this courtroom to see that no bunch of gun toughs try to take the law in their own hands for a little private lynching. It's happened before in this state. I just thought I'd mention it."

A low, angry rustle went through the crowd. Bullock's head drooped an inch. Twist squirmed and Sheriff Oglesby sweated. McCabe rapped on his high bench with a clawhammer to bring the room to order.

"Sit down, Mister Smiley," he boomed. "Per se. . . . Stand up, Mister Bullock. Now as the complainant in this here case at law, you may think you got the court by the ying-yang. But let me tell you this, Bog—me and Smiley been readin' the book, and a judge is a tolerably all-powerful man." McCabe crouched forward, eyes snapping.

"You might of railroaded me into this job, Bog, but by gum I ain't just a cow-town barber any more. Over there—" he stabbed a finger toward a leathery stranger with two guns, lounging easily against a near window—"and over there"—stabbing again—"and there and there, are four Texas Rangers. I reckon there won't be no violence. I called 'em in here from Austin, and I'm gonna run this court from now on, and it's gonna be a law-

abiding county, and," he raised his voice triumphantly, "I may run for attorney general next, like Smiley says, and if I do I want all the good people of this county to come to see me in Austin any time—yessir, any time. I'll introduce you to the Governor and we'll put the big pot in the little one! . . . Now, dadblast it, git on with this thing!"

Clara arose as the hubbub mounted and went to the jury box.

"Bill," she smiled straight at the lanky freight line agent. "You're the foreman of this jury—and a mighty handsome one, too—you fellows want to retire and vote a verdict or are you ready to give it here and now?"

Smiley saw her eyes linger softly on each appreciative juror. For a moment he felt an itch of jealousy inside himself but decided immediately the end justified the means.

The jury yelled out as one man with a very definite:

"Not guilty!"

The courtroom whooped and Toledo smacked Smiley on the back.

"You Rangers!" McCabe yelled, banging the hammer. "Please escort Bullock

and Twist Gentry and their crew to the edge of town—for protection."

"If you boys behave," Smiley said icily to the purpled Bullock, "maybe you can avoid a lynching. Why we might even turn out to be good neighbors. You ain't so bad, Bullock—you just ain't abreast of the times. These are legal days."

"You fire that coyote Twist Gentry," Toledo added, "and go home and help us fence up our grass flats to keep your dern cows out, and come over to Bar O sometimes and I'll barbecue you a yearling. 'Course it might be one of yours, but it'll taste good."

Bullock looked about at the grim faces of the lingering crowd. His face thawed. "All right, boys." He tried to grin. "I ain't so thick but I know when I'm licked. The damn county I organized got too serious and law-abidin' too quick. C'mon down to the Elite and I'll buy us coffee—Twist Gentry, you ride on your way, besides you don't like coffee anymore, anyhow."

"Just a minute," said Smiley. "I got to get my lawyer out of the middle of that jury and the judge."



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KILLER LOSE ALL

By JOHN JO CARPENTER



THE moment he saw the house was dark, Lefty Scroggs knew that something was wrong. Lois never kept those kids out this late, even on a Saturday night. He cursed himself because he had not stopped by for a whole week. The usual excuses—spring work, fence to fix, winter-drifted cattle to push back to the Triangle Dot range. Ed Rosebotham was a good man to work for, and easy-going, but he couldn't have a man riding over here every few days.

Still, on Jim Hailey's deathbed, Lefty had promised to watch out for Lois and

"I think I hit him," she said.

Sooner or later, Lefty knew, he'd have to scotch a human side-winder—and pay the price with his most cherished dream.

the kids. There just wasn't any excuse for welshing on a promise like that. Not when the woman was Lois.

He shoved his horse down the slope, vaguely uneasy. The uneasiness became panic as an uncertain light glimmered in the window and went out and Drive, Jim's old hound, began barking. The dog was inside the house, and it was a crazy bark that rumbled and echoed with fear in it.

Lefty slid off his horse and ran for the back door. As he passed the window, the light flared brilliantly across it in ragged forks of flame. Inside, little Ella and Jim screamed, "Mama, mama, mama," in the hysterical voice children use in calling a mother who isn't there.

He hit the door twice with his shoulder. On the second smash he broke the bolt out of its socket and went flying into the kitchen.

The curtain across the window was burning. The room was full of smoke, pitch dark except for the flickering light from the burning curtain. It smelled of burning cloth, a choking thing that made his eyes water. He burned his hand, ripping the curtain down.

He stamped the fire out on the floor, smelled kerosene, and went sick at his stomach with fear as he slipped on an oily spill on the floor.

"Ella, Jim, where are you?" he shouted. "It's me—Lefty. Are you kids all right?"

The old hound came in from the living room, snuffling gratefully as he recognized Lefty. He was a huge dog, weighing more than a hundred pounds, scarred from one end to the other by the mountain lions he had hunted while Jim Haney was still alive. Since Jim's death, two years ago, his job had been to watch over these children. Ella was six, Jimmie four. Drive was ten, with an old man's gruff wisdom and funds of courage that had never run out.

Lefty saw the children huddled under the library table in the living room, paralyzed with terror. He tripped over the piece of the broken lamp as he rushed toward them.

"It's me—Lefty—don't you know me? Where's Mama? What's the matter? You know you're not supposed to play with lights when your mother's not here!"

Ella recognized him and bolted out of her hiding place, Jimmie only a step or two behind. They rushed him, clasped his legs, and sobbed out their terror. The old hound stood there thumping his thick tail against the wall.

"You kids know better than to monkey with lamps," Lefty said gently, kneeling beside them. The closeness of them always left him with a funny tender feeling. He asked, "Where's your mama?"

"She went to town and it got dark and we got scared," they sobbed. Jimmie added, "I didn't light the lamp. Ella did."

"You said for me to!" Ella defended herself. "You cried because it was dark."

"Never mind now," Lefty said sternly. "Where did your mama go?"

"Just to town."

"When?"

"A long time ago. Maybe she had a runaway. She drove Ranger."

It was odd how much both kids had of both parents in them—Lois's tawny skin and dark eyes and oval face, Jim Haney's thin, triggerish quickness and grace, his ready, friend-making smile. He only hoped they had more git-up-and-go than Jim had. He only hoped they wouldn't turn out to be worthless, shiftless, sly and untrustworthy behind that quick smile, like their dad.

"Why didn't she take you along?"

"Because Ranger runs off."

That made sense. He said, keeping his voice calm so as not to upset them, "I see. Kids, has Phil Price been around lately?"

"Just two times."

"Two times? Did—did he come into the house?"

"No," said Ella, proudly. "Mama pointed Daddy's rifle at him and he went away in a hurry! She said she'd sic Drive on him."

He heard wheels in the yard and caught the dog before it could run out and spook the wild colt. He locked the dog in the bedroom and stalked outside, shaking with anger. This time, Lois had gone too far and it wasn't going to do her any good to lie. She had a perfectly good harness horse in the corral, and she would have driven it if she hadn't been scared to death of meeting Phil Price. Nobody but a fool, or an over-confident woman like Lois, would think that even a fast colt like Ranger, with a buggy behind him, could outrun a man on a horse.

He had been Jim Haney's sidekick for three years, knowing he was worthless, knowing his word wasn't very good. They had ridden into California together and fallen in love with the same girl. When Lefty saw how the girl felt about it, he kept his feelings to himself.

LOIS FRAME was her name then, and she was engaged to Phil Price. Jim Haney took her away from Phil, but it was Lefty Scroggs who tailed Phil after the wedding and kept him from following Jim and killing him. It was Lefty who nearly brained Phil with a sixgun, because it was the only way to stop him.

He held the colt while Lois climbed out of the buggy. She said, "Lefty! It's certainly a nice surprise to see you," and he thought her voice was a little apprehensive. She knew how he felt about those kids.

"I reckon," he said. "I'll tend to your horse. Go on inside and feed them kids their supper."

"It was—I mean I was later than I intended," she apologized, "and I was

afraid they'd be very scared in the dark."

"You was?"

"Yes. I'm glad you were here with them."

He said nothing about the fire, or when he got here. Let her find out for herself, get the same good scare. In the moonlight, his heart ached at her beauty. She was twenty-seven, and prettier than she had ever been at eighteen. Deeper, now, too. At eighteen she had had things too much her own way, because of her looks. Three years as Jim's wife, four as his widow, had brought strength to her.

He heard her scream as he stripped off the harness. The colt heard, too, and kicked out at him, and Lefty shivered at the thought of Lois harnessing and driving him without help. He hung up the harness and went inside and found her kneeling in the oily pool in the kitchen, her arms around the children.

He struck a match, found the other lamp, and lit it. He held it up and looked down at her. She was sobbing and kissing first one child and then the other.

"You're a mite late with that," he said grimly. "I had them calmed down once, and now you've got 'em all upset."

"Oh, Lefty, don't! Please, please, please."

"It was just luck I come along when I did, Lois. Just plain luck, or the whole place would be afire by now."

"Oh, Lefty!"

She stood up, and suddenly she was in his arms, her sweet, lovely face tilted back, her eyes closed. She sagged against him, her whole body trembling, and the thing they both knew but never had dared say was on the tip of his tongue. It hadn't taken her long to get wise to Jim Haney. She knew she had picked the wrong one of the sidekicks, and Lefty knew she knew, but neither of them had ever mentioned it.

"Honey, why don't you marry me?" he whispered, stroking her dark hair. "I

pretty near died when I saw that fire. Who'll be around the next time it happens?"

She pushed out of his arms. Now and then he felt her respond, but it never lasted long.

"Please, not tonight, Lefty," she pleaded. "I've had all I can stand today."

His anger came back. "Oh, what else did you have to stand? Or maybe you like Phil Price to come around. I thought you told me he never bothers you any more."

"He doesn't." She knelt to mop up broken glass and spilled oil.

"I get a different story from the kids."

"All right, maybe he did," she said shrilly, close to hysteria again, "but I can take care of myself."

"This sure looks like it! What happened today?"

"Nothing happened today."

"What made you come home so late then?"

"None of your business," she flared. Then she softened. Looking up, she went on, "Gee, Lefty, I don't mean it that way. I'll pray for you tonight, because of what you did—because of what you're always doing. But I can't marry you, Lefty. I don't want ever to be married again."

There was no answer to that. There never was, but he tried again: "I'm going to run Phil Price out of the country. I should have done it a long time ago." He almost added that Jim Haney, if he had been half a man, would have done it himself.

"I can handle Phil."

"Nobody can handle Phil. Not even his brother. He's crazy."

"Please, Lefty. He's just a—"

He interrupted furiously, "You're afraid of talk, but there's going to be a lot more talk if I have to kill him. You won't let me go back to him. You won't let me even talk to his brother. He thinks I'm scared of him! Lois, there ain't no-

body but me standing between you and him, and he—"

"Lefty, please!"

She'd had all she could stand. He mastered his anger and silently watched her clean up the floor. She was a strange girl, nervous and proud and independent. She rented her little dab of range to the Triangle Dot and took in a little fine sewing, and she wanted no one's pity, no one's charity, just because she was a widow with two kids. She kept the kids cleaner than most. She put a cloth on the table every day. Her restless ambition had driven Jim Haney crazy. Lefty, who had money of his own in the bank, understood this side of her. Other things about her, he didn't.

"Maybe you really like Phil Price?" he blurted.

She refused even to answer this, and for a moment he ached with jealousy. He knew a little about women. He had seen others who were attracted by big, flashy, brutal men. Sometimes women made a big fuss about honor, courtesy, respect, when what they really wanted was for a man like Phil Price to take them against their will. Lois . . . was she like that?

He knew better. He headed for the door, saying, "Better let the dog out. He's been locked up all day."

"Lefty, please don't go away in that frame of mind."

"I ain't in any frame of mind," he said.

He slammed the door. She let the dog out as he mounted, which was what Lefty had intended. The dog hated Phil Price, for some secret, teasing cruelty—or just because it was a good, sensible dog; Lefty never knew why, exactly. In a way they were two of a kind, Phil and the dog. Phil wasn't exactly right in his mind, Lefty had always suspected. Drive was just a little short of being vicious. He trusted a few people, tolerated a few more, and kept the rest at a distance with a snarl.

LEFTY trotted out of the yard. A few rods from the house he whistled softly. Old Drive loped to him joyously, thinking that another hunt was coming, at long last. He was California-bred from the best Eastern strains, and he had done more than his share in cleaning mountain lions out of these foothills:

"Heel, Drive!" Lefty said.

The dog trotted behind him. Lefty backtracked the buggy wheels easily until he came to the stage road, where other wheels, other hoofs, spoiled the sign. By then the bright moonlight had Drive in its spell. By then he had gotten used to following Ranger's sign.

"Follow, boy, follow!" Lefty encouraged him.

Drive lolloped ahead with an old dog's stiffness. Lefty kept him in sight, neither interrupting nor distracting him, because Drive hated backtracking and would quit cold at the slightest excuse.

The dog left the stage road suddenly, swinging down a narrow side road in a low-walled canyon toward the Hopkins place. He led Lefty right into the yard, climbing out of the canyon to a tilting mesa, Old Slim Hopkins came out at Lefty's hail.

"Howdy, Lefty," he said sociably. "How's ever'thing at the Triangle Dot?"

"Right smart," Lefty said. "I'm just giving the old hound a run, and seems like he's backtracked Lois here."

"Yes. She was here nearly two hours this evenin'. Her and the woman ain't never had such a good visit. Did she get home all right?"

"Yes," said Lefty, "she got home all right. Come on, Drive."

Anger and relief were all mixed up in him now. The whole Hopkins tribe was dirty and shiftless, and Lois had no patience with them. She wouldn't spend two hours visiting them while her own children went hungry in the dark—unless she was hiding out. But it at least meant she

had found a suitable place to hide.

He shook his head. Something had happened, something bad, so bad she had left her own kids at home alone, without even mentioning it to the Hopkinses. Slim would have said something, if she had.

The dog struck out across the mesa, running swiftly and easily in the moonlight. Lefty's heart ached with the terror that must have been Lois's as she drove that wild colt across this open range at a dead run, hoping to get to the canyon road and in sight of the Hopkins place before the man pounding along beside her could stop her.

In a little while they again intersected the stage road. The hound would have gone on to town, but Lefty called him back. He knew all he needed to know.

"Go home!" The hound dissented. He was having fun. "Home!" Lefty shouted.

The end of his rope cracked out. Drive trotted home without any apparent rancor. Lefty let him get well on his way. He got down and twisted a torch from last year's dead grass. Lighting it, he studied the ground.

The buggy had pulled out of the road here—maybe just as a courtesy, maybe in an effort to ride around someone barring the way. Here the road made a wide turn through thick chapparal, and if a man was going to waylay a woman, here was a good place to do it. Then the buggy had veered, at a dangerously sharp angle, straight through the chapparal.

Lois had taken a big chance, running that crazy colt through the brush and across open, rough range. A good thing it was uphill. Phil wouldn't dare follow her down the road anywhere else, and apparently she had beaten him to the Hopkins place. Then that two-hour wait there, afraid to go home because of Phil, afraid not to go home because of the children.

It angered him, but suddenly he understood her, and her need to prove herself.

She might be wrong, but it was a good kind of wrong. Three men were mixed up in her life. One was dead, and she had to be sure she wasn't marrying the second one out of fear of the third.

He cut across country a few miles, and in a canyon came to Gene Price's place. He called Gene's name, and Gene came out, snapping his suspenders and puffing his pipe. He was big and dark and powerful, like his brother, and not much fonder of work. But he had a decent wife and four kids. He was faithful to them and a good neighbor, and in his way he was doing the best he could.

"Phil at home, Gene?" Lefty asked.

"No. He just went down the spring to take a bath. I guess he aims to go to town and get liquored up again. Now what's he been up to?" He knew there was no love lost between Lefty and his brother, and he knew his brother's nature.

"He waylaid Lois Haney and chased her clear to the Hopkins place this afternoon. She stayed there two hours, scared to go home because of him. That's all!"

Gene cursed. "He come in late. I don't know what I'm goin' to do, Lefty. I can't put up with no more. He's had his last chance with me. Next time I'm going to run him out."

"You do that, Gene. Down to the spring, you say?"

Gene meant well, but he was half scared of his younger brother and too slack anyway to put his foot down. Lefty turned down the canyon toward the spring, half a mile away. Nearing it, he dismounted, tied his horse, and went ahead softly on foot.

Under the trees, the spring-flow had been damned to make a deep, clear pool. Phil stood waist-deep in the middle, scrubbing himself with a cake of soap. His thick arms seemed to end at the elbows, where the whiteness stopped and the tanned forearms began. His thick waist, deep, wide chest had a grizzly

bear's look of measureless, savage power.

"I thought I told you to stay away from Lois Haney," Lefty said.

PHIL jumped at the sound of the voice in the darkness. He dropped the soap, turning. A patch of moonlight illuminated his heavy, coarsely handsome face.

"I didn't bother her, Lefty," he cried hoarsely. "You got me all wrong. If she said I bothered her, she's just tryin' to make trouble."

Lefty walked over to where Phil's clothing was piled. He picked up Phil's gun and threw it into the deepest part of the pool. Something else caught his eyes—something that winked and twinkled brightly, something that had slipped out of Phil's shirt pocket.

Lefty picked it up, the cold anger in him slowly heating to a blind, choking rage. It was a cheap back-comb of tortoise shell set with valueless glass beads. It was what Lois usually wore in her hair when she went to town. He remembered seeing it a week ago today.

Phil had laid hands on her. He had come close enough to snatch the comb. Probably he had reached for her from the saddle as she tried to turn the wild colt and force it through the chapparal. He had touched her head, and this comb had come away in his hand.

Lefty put it in his pocket. He said, "Get out of there, Phil, and I'll give you a lesson you won't forget, this time."

Phil began splashing toward the other bank.

"I didn't mean to skeer her, Lefty," he pleaded. "You ain't going to let her make no trouble between us, are you?"

That was Lois's point of view—she didn't want to make trouble between two men, she didn't want to be the subject of a jealous fight. For a moment, Lefty wavered. Heretofore, she had always insisted she could take care of herself—that Phil had never caused her trouble.

This time, he knew better. This time, he had seen for himself.

He stepped out of his boots and pants and waded into the pool, leaving his gun behind. Phil was a coward to the core of his big body. He feared not just a beating from Lefty, but a lynching from everyone, if the story of what he'd done today came out.

He went scrambling up the other bank, pleading, "Now, Lefty, I'm chilled stiff. Now, Lefty, you wouldn't jump a man that can't fight back, would you? Now, Lefty—"

He tried to circle the pool to get to Lefty's gun. Lefty splashed back and cut him off. Phil turned and began running blindly down the canyon.

Lefty stepped back into his boots and ran after him. He caught the barefoot man quickly and easily. He got both hands on Phil's upper arm—a mistake, because the hairy arm was wet and slippery.

Phil jerked loose and swung his fist. The weight of his turning body was behind it. Lefty took it on the forehead and went down to his knees, and the canyon walls reeled.

Phil saw his chance. He got his big hands in Lefty's hair and jerked him to his feet. He slammed a fist into Lefty's body, yelling exultantly, "You think she's your woman, do you? I'm gonna beat your head off and hers, too. Nobody whips me with a buggy whip!"

Lefty knew more about what had happened then. He covered up and waited for his head to clear, because a man pays for his mistakes in a fight. He got his wits back and drove his fist into Phil's stomach.

One blow loosened the grip on his hair. Lefty slugged away at the white body of the man, knowing Phil's craven fear of pain. He drove him backward, making him grunt and moan and sob until he fell to his knees. Lefty leaned over him.

"She had to whip you, did she?" he panted. "So you did chase her, didn't you? Killin's too good for you, Phil. You won't chase no more women when I get through with you."

He went back, stepped out of his boots, threw away his wet socks. He put on his pants, dried his feet against his pants legs, taking his time. He put his boots on. He stooped over Phil's clothes and pulled the belt out of the pants. Phil fancied himself a dude, and he wore a wide belt with a silver buckle and a silver tip on the tongue end.

What he had to do made him sick, because it wasn't fighting. But the man Phil was made him sicker. Lois's tawny oval face floated before his eyes, nerving him for the job. She wouldn't understand the need of it, but Lefty did. So would any man.

He walked toward Phil, swinging the belt. He stirred Phil with his toe.

"Take care of your eyes because I ain't going to, and I don't want to blind you."

Phil saw the belt whistle down. He screamed and floundered away on hands and knees. Lefty followed him step for step, flailing the belt with all his strength, until its silver tip came off and his hands grew cramped and sweat-slippery on the buckle.

He threw the belt away when Phil lay down, sobbing, and refused even to crawl.

"Next time," he panted, "you'll be stung up."

HE GOT on his horse and went away, leaving Phil to crawl back to the pool to cool and wash his hurts. When Lefty got back to the Triangle Dot, he awakened Ed Rosebotham and told him about it. There was no squarer man in the California cattle country than Ed. He rented Lois Haney's range for a little more than it was worth, and he had old-fashioned ideas about women.

"You should have killed him," Ed said,

at the end. "You know that by now."

"You don't know Lois like I do. If I killed a man because of her, she'd hate me to the end of her days."

"You'll still have to kill him. You can't whip a man and just let it drop. I'd watch her place pretty close now, Lefty."

"He won't go back there and bother her. He knows better!"

"Ha!" Ed snorted. "You whipped him like a dog. Somebody's got to pay for that, boy. You don't think he's going to hunt you up, do you? He'll blame her for telling. He'll take it out on her."

"I'm not going to expect much work out of you for a while. You watch that house. That'll be your job. I guess I owe Jim Hanev that much."

"Thanks, Ed. I knowed I could count on you for sense."

"Sense? Too late for that! You should have killed him."

Lefty spent the night on the table land above Lois's place, watching it until the moonlight died, and in the dark hour before Dawn worrying because he could not see the house. The more he thought about it, the more he was sure Ed was right.

"But he's wrong, too!"

Lefty was all mixed up. The thought of killing made him sick, and he knew it was the end where Lois was concerned if he killed Phil. He never could see her and the kids again. It would make the wrong kind of talk, the kind a widow couldn't afford. It was too much like two jealous stags fighting over her.

In a whipping, the clear element of punishment left the woman's name good. He guessed he'd let it go at that.

He saw Lois come out at sunup. Later the kids came out, but this day they did not go to Sunday school. The old harness horse and the wild colt drowsed in the corral. The woman and children did not go away. No one came to see them. It was a lonely Sunday; he wondered how many more the woman had known.

He was half starved by the time Ed Rosebotham brought some sandwiches out, early in the afternoon.

"It was a good hunch," Ed said. "Sending you here, I mean. I stopped in at Gene Price's place. Just how bad did you hurt him? He never come home."

"Pretty bad, I reckon."

"Bad enough for him just to crawl off and die?"

Lefty shook his head slowly. "Not that bad. Did you tell Gene what happened?"

"Yep. He says watch out for Phil. He says you should have killed him. He says he's helped Phil out of his last scrape. I'll swap horses with you, Lefty. Your'n' needs feed and water."

"I forgot all about it," Lefty said guiltily.



The sandwiches had no taste for him now, but he munched them and thought about killing a man. He stretched out on his stomach and put his chin on his forearms and watched the house through half-closed eyes. Lois sewed in a rocker under a tree, the kids played in the hammock, and the sun shone.

He must have dozed, because suddenly he heard steps behind him—suddenly he rolled over, clawing at his gun, shaken with fear. But it was only Drive, the old hound. The dog was standing over him, tail awag, brutally heavy, grizzled muzzle agape.

Lefty mopped the nervous sweat from his face. "You sure gave me a scare,

dog," he said, and it was less lonesome while the dog stayed there.

At dark, Lois whistled the dog back to the house. The darkness closed in slowly. Light, warm and friendly, showed in the windows of the little house. After a while, Lois came out and whistled and called, whistled and called.

Lefty became alarmed when the dog did not respond. He swore, because it was probably his own fault. Drive was a man's dog, a hunter. Having discovered Lefty on the mesa, he thought he might get a hunt out of it. It had awakened his urge to prowl.

Lefty moved halfway down the slope and stood there a long time, listening and watching, before he sat down. He saw Lois and the kids eat their supper. The kids vanished at bedtime, and then there was only Lois's shadow on the window. She sewed, because that was all a decent, lonely, independent widow could do.

The lights went out at last. He did not keep track of the time, but he knew it was late—later than she usually remained awake. She was afraid to go to bed, he realized suddenly.

He stood up, full of a strange, heavy dread, and began to move toward the house. Suddenly Lois screamed, and he jerked out his gun and began running.

"Lois!" he shouted, but she did not hear it because at the same instant a gun boomed inside the house—a rifle, the heavy old gun Jim Haney had hunted lions with when he should have been working.

H E BEGAN running toward the house. The gun boomed again, and somewhere the little girl began screaming for her mother. He saw Lois's silhouette vaguely at the window as he raced across the yard. The shadowy rifle in her hands seemed to follow him.

"Lois! It's me—Lefty!" he yelled.

"Lefty!" she screamed, and there was

joy and recognition in her sweet voice.

"Where'd he go?"

"It's Phil Price. He tried to break in the back door. He ran around in front. I think I hit him."

He charged around the front of the house, trusting her to be cool-witted enough not to fire at the wrong man. The little girl stopped screaming, and he knew she had gone into the children's room to comfort them.

He could do as he pleased now. Her disapproval was no longer a dead weight on him. It was bad, to have blood and death between them. It might never wear off, it might always keep him away from her and the kids, but he was no longer forbidden to do what he thought a man should do.

He saw Phil Price lurching along the fence, hanging to it with one hand, clutching his side with the other. He had been hit low down—a bad wound, but he was bull-strong and still alive.

"Phil!" Lefty shouted, running out into the open.

Phil turned with the big gun in his hand; he could palm a .45 like most men could a .32. He leaned against the fence, bracing himself, and brought the big gun up.

Something shot through the air—something nearly as big as a man—something that cleared the three-wire fence easily—something that growled and raged and snarled and could not be shaken off.

Phil screamed as he had screamed when Lefty whipped him. He tried to get the gun up, but the old dog had him by the back of the neck.

They went down together, the dog on top, the man underneath. Lefty ran toward them, shouting the dog's name.

"Drive! Begone! Begone!"

The dog would answer one man, but that man was dead. Jim Haney could call it away from a lion, but a lion fought

(Please continue on page 129)

THE TINHORN TROOPER

Ex-gambler McClaren despised the cavalry and the cavalry despised him—until a bloody Rio night forged a misfit into a soldier.

The Mexican raised his long sword.

By
**BEN
SMITH**



WADE McCLAREN rode in the rear of the scattered column of cavalry not in fear of what might lie ahead, although the sullen waters of the Rio Grande were foreboding enough. It was the tongue of Sergeant Buckham he was avoiding. The tongue and the insults that made Wade wish to pull the

hefty Scot from his horse and wipe his face with some of the Rio mud. McClaren wiped his own thin face with supple fingers; gambler's fingers Beckham would have said. Fingers that came alive at the feel of a new deck of cards or the cool touch of a gambler's derringer.

With his hatred held deep within him, McClaren looked back along the disordered ranks. There was no parade-ground nattiness about these hard-riding dragoons now. Hours of rain had churned the river bank into a morass. Men and their equipment were merely unidentifiable masses of moving clay.

It was April, 1846, and the United States Cavalry was riding boldly upon land that the Mexicans called their own.

"Nasty, ain't it?" Buckham rode by, his big frame at ease in the saddle. Then he added, "tinhorn."

It was his private epithet, Buckham's reference to McClaren's past life in the gaming rooms of New Orleans. Wade McClaren made no reply; military etiquette did not require that a man make answer to an insult; but anger boiled in his blood like a virus. Abruptly, he swung his tired mount across the soggy trail, putting the sea of mud between himself and Sergeant Buckham.

From the front of the column, Lieutenant Hogan watched the bit of byplay between the two of them. As Buckham dropped into position beside him, Hogan said, "Bit hard on McClaren, aren't you, Sergeant?"

Buckham spat disgustedly and in that one action summed up his opinion of the matter. "Don't reckon, sir. Damned tinhorn gambler . . ."

"A man's past is his own business, Buckham."

Moodily, Buckham eyed the surging Rio at their left. From time to time, bits of driftwood told of still higher water above them.

"But," Buckham grunted, "not when he

brings it with him. He's got half the last pay in the outfit now."

Hogan, his mind upon the dirty work that must lie ahead, only nodded shortly. Knowing intimately this section of Texas, fully acquainted with the thinking processes of the Mexican people, Hogan was a capable officer, one who felt that the Border Wars were his own personal business.

"I'm not going to interfere," Hogan said, at last. "If he's slick-fingered, the men will take care of him. But, until this is over, no personal fights."

"Like you say," Buckham agreed. But the gleam in his dark eyes gave evidence that he had gained ground. With the Lieutenant's promise of non-interference, Buckham could easily make Wade McClaren's life in the dragoons extremely unpleasant.

Back in the line, McClaren rode silently, listening to the monotonous sounds of his horses hooves in the sucking mud, mentally cursing the ever-lasting rain and the folly of men who fought stupid battles over God-forsaken bits of earth.

There were many times when he had wondered at his own decision to join the Army. New, little regulated organization that it was, the life was far from the easy days in New Orleans. Sleepy nights filled with idleness and music, the weeks passing like the golden coin across the green of the gaming tables.

Could it have been, rationalized McClaren, that he had fought the very uselessness of such a life?

If that had been the case, excitement with purpose could have been found on any frontier of this country. There were fortunes to be made by nimble-fingered men in almost any line of endeavor. Twice a fortune for such a man as McClaren.

Yet, today, where was the gold? Where were the double eagles that had once been stacked before him. McClaren laughed his short, bitter laugh. He was a fool. Doubly a fool. And, the men who rode with him

were idiots. They would, all of them, be paid off with bullets. Of what concern of theirs was it that the Territory of Texas was claimed as Mexican soil? Yet they would fight and for less than fifty cents a day.

"It won't be long now . . . tinhorn." It was Buckham again, riding back, speaking loud enough for the men nearby to hear. Buckham grinned, showing square, tobacco-stained teeth. McClaren fought the desire to smash his face with a carbine butt. Buckham added, "That's Matamoros, just across the Rio."

McCLAREN looked beyond the water at a cluster of shacks and the towering spire of a church. The buildings were huddled in the rain like a child's building block, haphazardly strewn.

"Oh, go to hell," McClaren retorted and had the satisfaction of seeing Buckham's big face redden with anger. It would be short satisfaction, McClaren knew, for Buckham would soon find a way to even the score. Unconsciously he straightened in the flat saddle, easing his weary legs.

Lieutenant Hogan rode by, heading for the rear of the column and Buckham, without another glance at McClaren, rode after him.

"Bootlickin' horse's neck," someone said in a whisper. McClaren twisted in the saddle, recognizing Pete Simon's red head and angular face. "Don't get into this," McClaren warned.

"Oh, I hope you beat the livin' hell out of him, someday. Them three stripes have gone to his head." Simmons grinned boyishly.

The rest of the outfit, McClaren knew, watched the conflict between him and Buckham with no partiality. Of the two, many of the dragoons would have preferred McClaren, gambler though he had been, and crooked so many said. But they were gamblers themselves, betting their

lives against the swiftness and accuracy of their guns. To their minds, it was Buckham who made the accusation. It was up to McClaren to defend himself.

Only Pete Simmons openly crossed the imaginary line that divided the company into two camps, stoutly avowing that the lanky man from New Orleans was as straight as a carbine barrel. But, then, Simmons did not gamble. He was saving his pay for a girl back home . . .

Under a dripping cottonwood, Hogan was in earnest consultation with Buckham. By the sweeps of his arm, McClaren saw that the subject of their conversation was Matamoros and he knew that they were debating the possibility of a Mexican attack across the river. Evidently, both of them discounted the possibility owing to the high water because Hogan gave the order to break ranks.

McClaren sat twisted about in the saddle, watching everything but saying nothing.

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ing. His blue coat, the lighter blue trousers, were soggy and mud-stained. Water dripped from the bill of his cap and trickled down the planes of his cheeks. His boots were as limp as rag and as cold as a hound's tongue on his feet.

Buckham rode back into the midst of the group of resting men, motioning them into a close circle with a sweeping arm.

"Far as we know," he said, eyeing McClaren, "The Mex are all on the other side of the river. General Ampudia is supposed to have about four-thousand men bunched there. However, as usual, we'll post a guard."

Here Buckham grinned. "McClaren, Simmons, you two take it." He pulled reins and his big black slogged away toward the head of the column. Slowly the dragoons fell in, some relieving the tenseness by joking, some staring silently at the bobbing ears of their mounts.

"... and I told her," McClaren heard a trooper mutter, "that I'd be back when Texas was ours."

He heard Pete Simmon's young voice and felt a moment's sadness that men such as this must also be crucified in the boiling cauldron of war. For what were they fighting? And, what was he, McClaren, doing here?

There was another world, a charming world... McClaren shook his head slowly.

Night fell over them like a blanket. Across the rumbling Rio, Matamoras huddled in the darkness. McClaren, afoot, clutched his carbine under the skirt of his coat and listened to the dripping of the cottonwoods. Once he heard Simmon's footsteps as the other dragoon walked across the end of the campsite. He wondered about Simmons.

It was part of his own question, this strange thing that called men from the safety of their own homes to cast the dice of their lives.

In his mind's eye he could see the green

tables back in New Orleans. The wan glow of the hanging lamps. The trickle of gold. Cigar smoke, sweet, hanging like a shifting banner. The smell of perfume...

AND here he was, sodden and cold along a river he'd never seen before, wresting land from people he did not give a tinker's damn about. The idea came to him, out of the night.

Why not go, and now? In ten minute's time he could lead a horse beyond earshot. By daylight he would be well away. And the rest of the company would be too busy to send a detail after him. He would be a deserter.

McClaren went so far as to take a step in the direction of the camp, then he remembered Simmons. The ugly face, the topping of carrot hair and the freckles. Yet, Simmons believed in him...

What difference did that make?

Across the river in the twisting streets of Matamoras, a torch flashed, then vanished. Someone had left the protection of a narrow alley and crossed an open space. Going where? McClaren watched, his eyes straining into the inkiness, but there was no further sign of life. Then, he smiled.

Buckham was with the rest of the men, back in the comparative comfort of the camp. He would never, McClaren decided, appreciate being summoned to the river bank.

"Sergeant Buckham," McClaren called, knowing that the next man would pass his message along. "Sergeant Buckham! Lights across the river."

McClaren heard Buckham cursing, felt a moment's pleasure as the Sergeant slipped and went to his knees in the darkness. "If you're kidding, McClaren, damned if I don't shoot you."

"They're up to something, Sergeant," McClaren insisted. "A torch flared, just for an instant, then vanished."

"You're seeing things... tinhorn,"

Buckham came close, his face a dark blob.

McClaren knew, however, that the man was watching across the Rio Grande. However Buckham might hate McClaren, he was first of all a good soldier. McClaren felt a sudden contempt for a man who could so lose himself in service. Buckham was another of the fools that rode to glory in the mud and sweat of the cavalry.

"Nothing," Buckham said, finally. "Next time, close your eyes and it'll go away." He laughed shortly and lurched away.

McClaren watched through the night, until the gray dawn came timidly. The river was, by now, a raging flood and the tension in the camp was relaxed. No man, leave alone an Army, could cross that water. Even the Mexicans.

McClaren hunkered by a small fire, along with Pete Simmons, and fashioned a morning smoke. His eyes, as Pete told him, looked as if they had been burned in with a hot ramrod.

"What you think, Mac," Simmons asked, his eyes on the dirty mist that hung above the Rio. "Will they cross?"

"How the hell should I know. Hogan is the expert. He seems to think they won't."

"Hope he's right."

"Pete." McClaren watched Buckham walking from the cottonwoods along the river. "Why do we do this? Why do we sit here in the mud when we could all be home? Do you know?"

"Why . . ." Simmons's face went slack and McClaren knew that the younger man had never considered the question before. "It's our country, Wade . . . I guess . . ."

"Ours?" McClaren's laugh was short.

"I don't know." McClaren knew that Simmons was thinking. "You talk faster than I do, you sorta confuse me."

McClaren laughed and slapped Simmons on the knee.

"Forget it. Whatever comes today, I guess we're stuck with it." But in his

mind McClaren knew that another night would find him gone.

For he had asked his question and knew that there was no answer. He would leave, quietly, and give Buckham the field. Yet, remembering Simmons, McClaren knew a moment's sadness.

THE command was saddling and McClaren rose slowly to his feet, crumbling the butt end of his cigarette into the mud. Up on a rise, he could see Lieutenant Hogan and Buckham, preparing to lead the company toward the north. As McClaren swung his foot into the stirrup, he heard Hogan's voice raised in a hoarse shout and the first volley of shots.

About him was confusion. Troopers, half-mounted, fought skittish horses at the same time fighting to get their carbines from scabbards. Above the rise by the river a sombrero lifted and a screaming ball of death whistled into the closely bunched men.

Hogan called, "Spread out and drop back." The last words mixed with the blare as the bugler sounded retreat. The Lieutenant, his saber upraised, thundered down the slope and through the line of men followed by sporadic bursts of rifle fire. McClaren knew what the procedure would be. The Mexicans would make the retreat along the Rio a costly one. He heard Buckham's stentorian below, "Give 'em hell, boys. They'll run out of powder."

The command, in more order now, began covering their own rear with rifle fire. Taylor's infantry was somewhere down river; their best hope was to join the greater force.

Wade McClaren, with Simmons at quarter, fired at the elusive shapes, reloaded and fired again until the series of actions became mechanical. His mind, methodical as always, was calculating. It was possible that the retreat was a ruse. That Hogan was merely leading the enemy

from the positions they had had time to prepare during the night; drawing them into the open.

New Orleans, to McClaren, seemed far away.

Then he saw Buckham's big black stagger and go down, kicking convulsively. Buckham, keeping his feet, hit the ground in a running slide clutching his dragoon revolver. As he raised his black head a Mexican, with uplifted saber, thundered out of the smoking hell around them.

Calmly, even smiling a little, Buckham waited. There was a dark smear of blood on the side of his face and his cap was gone. His shaggy mane moved a little as the breeze touched it. It was suddenly calm, even the rifle-fire seemed to halt at that instant.

McClaren swung his horse in a slewing turn, heading in Buckham's direction. Simmons, on a lighter mount, slipped past him and rode through the low-hanging ribbons of powder smoke. McClaren saw his red hair moving like a torch, his rifle raised in one hand, a wild, rebellious yell upon his lips.

It was over before it started. In one breath, Simmons had been riding like a wild man, bent on Buckham's rescue, the next . . .

There was a burst of musket fire and Simmons piled over the head of his startled horse, landing upon his shoulders in the mud; His horse, well-trained, avoided his body by the narrowest of margins and stood, reins dragging a bare twenty feet away.

McClaren, riding hard, saw that Simmons had been shot through the head, that, between his eyes there blossomed an ugly wound. His reason told him that it was some convulsion of death but it seemed to him, as he passed, that Simmons looked full into his face and smiled.

The Mexican, McClaren saw, had made his pass at Buckham and had missed. The big sergeant was now waiting for his re-

turn his smoking pistol betraying the fact that he, too, had made his miss. But Buckham's thick lips were fashioned into a fighting grin and, even as the Mexican galloped toward him, Buckham spat derisively on the ground.

As the Mexican rode back, his dark face alight with the desire to kill, he raised his long sword. McClaren spurred viciously, facing the man, his back toward Buckham. Smiling thinly he hitched his arm and his derringer, his gambler's hide-out gun slid into his hand. The Mexican grinned his last foolish grin and went down, his teeth and backbone blown to bits by the .44 slug.

Buckham appropriated a riderless horse and swung aboard. "Obliged," he said.

In the saddle now, he gazed quizzically at the snub nosed gun still in McClaren's hand, cocked his head to the diminishing gunfire. "They're running out of powder," Buckham said. "They always do." He grinned, a friendly grin;

"We'll be going back after them, soon's as we re-group," he ventured. He was still looking at the derringer held so carelessly in those long gambler's fingers. "Will you be with us?"

McClaren thought again of the life he had left behind him; weighed it against the mud and death along the Rio Grande; thought of Pete Simmons and the girl who waited but would never see him.

"You're damn right I will," he replied.

Buckham grunted. "I figured you would. It's a good deal . . ." As he rode away, back toward the main body of the men, McClaren plainly heard the final word.

It was, "Trooper."

It was then that McClaren knew why he was here, why he was fighting. He also knew that his friends fought by his side. Smiling widely, he pitched his snub-nosed hide-out gun into the air and watched it vanish into the muddy waters of the Rio Grande.

Next

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Issue

Published

February 2nd

Howdy, folks. . . Robert L. Trimmell's "The Sixgun Six" is the exciting lead novel for the next issue. It's the story of law-dog Todd Dulany, who, after receiving a tip-off from saloonman Sam Bredon, determined to stop the arrival of six strangers who were heading toward Clayton—to take over the wealthy boomtown and wring it dry.



Todd rode the stage as shotgun guard, hoping to prevent these six dangerous passengers from ever arriving in Clayton. At the watering stop, Todd challenged them—and barely beat the bullet of a gambler's hideout gun.



In spite of Todd's efforts, the remaining five straggled into Clayton on foot. When Todd cornered one of them in the Samcard Saloon, the lead-like fists of Bully-Boy Cray smashed him through the batwings.

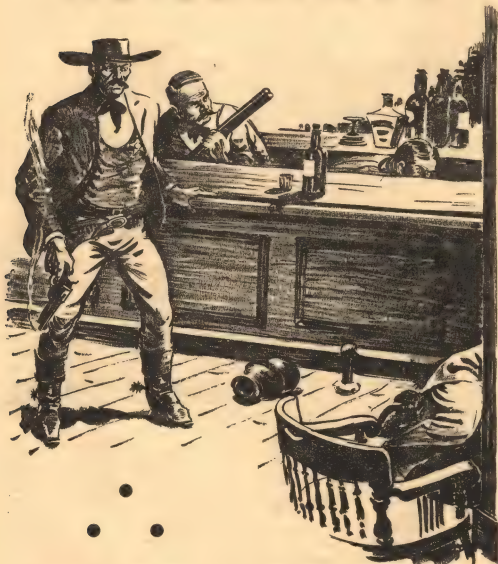


Coming to in his room, Todd found Lily Franks, female member of the gang, beside him. Todd asked, "Are you the brains of this bunch?" He knew he had to find the killer-boss—or be killed.



Later, Todd staggering after a brutal beating by the remaining tough boys in the gang, suddenly found himself trapped in a searing inferno. . . . The complete story will be told in the next issue.

HAIR-TRIGGER HEADLINES



To call himself a man among men in the tough Storm River country, all editor Ed Darley had to do—was fight Boss Lytell's sixgun might with printer's ink!

*Blazing Novelette of
Western Violence*

By **WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER**



Ed Darley's life, his future, his happiness — everything was condensed into this one vital moment.

CHAPTER

1

Portent of Tragedy

Ed Darley waded out of the water, shook his head and ran a hand through tousled hair. Looking up at Nina Waldron on the rock, he asked, "Ready to go?"

Nina laughed down at him. "What's the matter, stub your toe?"

"No, I'm hungry."

She made a derisive gesture. "If you'd quit trying to cook for yourself, maybe you'd get your stomach filled up once in

awhile. You need a woman around."

"I'll quit any time you'll take the job."

She hesitated, poised on the rock ready to dive, her face suddenly grave. "My ears must be full of water. I thought I heard a proposal."

"You heard right," he said. "Come on down and I'll show you what I mean."

She laughed again. "Catch me if you want to show me anything."

She dived, cutting the water with the precision of a thrown knife blade. She was a blonde girl, slender and supple, and possessed of a talent for doing everything with easy perfection. Ed, watching her swim across the pool and back, felt his inadequacy as he always did at such a time. If they went hunting, Nina came in with the deer. If they went riding, she would be on a lively horse and he'd be on his ancient black gelding that had forgotten how to buck five years ago. He loved her, but he had never proposed, and now, watching her come out of the water, he wondered if he ever would.

"What was that you were going to show me?" she asked.

He reached for her and she ducked away, laughing again. "You see how it is," he said. "You don't want to be shown."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "A man ought to pursue a woman."

"Think I'm a greyhound?"

"No, you're not that," she said. "Go get dressed. Then we'll go home and fill the inner man."

She ran past him into the willows down river, and he turned away, the familiar doubts that had been in him for months plaguing him again. To him Nina Waldron was everything a man could expect in a woman. She deserved the best, but he could not give it to her. He had come to Pine City three years ago and bought the *Herald*, but it had not proved as profitable as he had hoped. Then Galt Lytell had come to Pine City the spring

before and had promptly started courting Nina.

He moved to the upstream side of the rock and dressed, then returned to the pool and hunkered there. The river headed high up in the glaciers of the Cascade Mountains and except for a few weeks in late summer and early fall it was too cold for swimming. Now, looking down into the crystal-clear water that loitered momentarily on its turbulent way to the Columbia, he wondered if there would be even these few weeks of swimming in another year. Lytell had brought in a thousand men and was building an irrigation system that would water fifty thousand acres. By the time his dam was finished, there would probably be nothing here but a dry river bed.

Nina came out of the willows, her wet hair stringing-around her face. She sat down beside him and ran a comb through it, grimacing at him. "I must be beautiful now."

"You are," he said quietly. "I never saw you when you weren't."

She gave him a searching glance. "Ed Darley, sometimes I wonder. Dad says you're the best newspaper man in the state and when I hear you put words together I believe it, but . . . you. . . ." She looked away. "I mean, it seems funny you ever came to a little old cowtown like Pine City."

"I wasn't made to live in a big city," he said somberly, "and I wanted my own business. I had enough to buy the *Herald*."

"You're doing a good job," she said quickly. "I didn't mean that you weren't, and you're not like most city dudes. I mean. . . ." She floundered for words again, suddenly embarrassed. "I wish I had your talent for saying what I mean."

"I guess it's the only talent I have," he said.

"Oh, don't be a fool. What I'm trying to say is that you fit into things. People

took to you. Elected you mayor and that's a real mark of trust in Pine City."

He fished his pipe out of his pocket and filled it, eyes on the snow peaks of the Cascades, scarlet now with the late afternoon sun throwing its sharp light upon them. He knew that she was right about him being accepted and it was a matter in which he took pride, but there was the other side of it, too, a side he had never voiced to anyone. There were certain qualifications here that marked a man and he didn't have them. He could bluff for awhile, but sooner or later he would reach the place where a bluff wouldn't work. Galt Lytell's coming had hurried that time.

Ed fired his pipe and flipped the charred match into the river. "I've done some things I'm proud of, but there's a lot more to be done." He pulled on his pipe a moment. "I guess it's mostly that I liked Pine City the way it was."

"We all did," she said, "but we've got to expect changes." She pinned her hair up and gave it a final pat. "I'm ready."

She jumped up and would have run toward the horses if he had not said, "Nina." He was on his feet, pipe in his hand. She faced him, blue eyes questioning. "I'm not as talented with words as you think. Anyhow I don't know how to say this because I don't want you to think I'm just jealous."

She laughed. "Who would you be jealous about?"

"Lytell."

"Now what . . ." she shook her head. "You're talking crazy. After all, he's only been here six months."

"Long enough," he said grimly. "There's a lot of things I don't know about this country, but I do know about men like Lytell. He's a crook."

"That doesn't sound like you," she said scornfully. "Come on, I'll race you back to town."

SHE RAN to her horse and stepped into the saddle. He followed, slowly, and mounted, knowing that he shouldn't have said it. Still, he was glad that he

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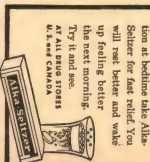


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had. He was convinced that he was right, but Lytell was the kind of man who could blind a woman with his charm.

She flashed him a smile as he reined into the road beside her. "To the bridge," she said. "The usual stake."

It was an old bet between them. She promised him a kiss if he won, and he washed the supper dishes if he lost. He had never won and he knew she wasn't worried now. "Give me a hundred yards," he said.

"Nothing doing. You'll win fair if you win."

She had a sorrel gelding that was one of the fastest horses on the river, and she won her share of the races every fair time. Now she sent her sorrel down the road on a run, not looking back until she reached the bridge, and when he came jogging along five minutes later, she said scornfully, "When are you going to get rid of that crowbait and buy a horse?"

"When I can ride one," he said, color working up into his face. It was another example of his inadequacy, of not being able to do the things that were given a high value here on Storm River.

"I'm sorry," she said contritely.

They crossed the bridge, hoofs striking sharply on the planks, and came into Pine City's Main Street. Except for Galt Lytell's new office building at the end of the block, this part of town had not changed. It was River Street which ran parallel to Main Street that had brought the change. There, packed within the one block, were the hastily thrown-up frame buildings that housed the saloons and gambling palaces and dance halls, as concentrated a chunk of hell as a man could find in Eastern Oregon. It was Galt Lytell's doings and it was one of the reasons Ed had grown to hate the man and everything he stood for.

There was no talk between them as they rode down Main Street. They passed Joe Becker's Mercantile, the false front

mellowed by rain and snow and wind until it was a painless gray and the tall lettering across it was too faded to be read. There was the blacksmith shop, the hotel, the livery stable, and Ed's print shop. And there was Ben Hackett's saloon, sedate and dignified and lacking business since River Street had developed.

They turned east until they reached Nina's home, a white house with a neat picket fence and a row of locust trees in front. She stepped down and handed him the reins. "Supper in an hour. Don't be late."

"Not me," he said. "Remind Doc about the council meeting."

"I'll tell him, but I'm not sure he'll be there. Mrs. Becker's baby is due any time."

"She can have it alone," he said. "We need him tonight."

"You don't know much about women and babies and doctors," she said witheringly, and ran up the path to the house.

He reined around, and leading her sorrel, rode back to Main Street. He left both horses at the livery stable and turned into the street. It was after five now. Within an hour or so River Street would come to life, the hideous din that flowed from it making sleep difficult until after midnight.

Ed stepped into Lon Patton's blacksmith shop, calling, "Council meeting tonight."

Patton glanced up from the forge. "I'll be there, Ed."

He said, "Good," and moved along the walk to the Mercantile. Joe Becker was waiting on a customer, but he took time to give Ed a friendly nod.

"Council meeting," Ed said.

"I'll be there unless I'm needed at home." The storekeeper scratched his cheek. "Figuring on trouble?"

"I'm betting on it," Ed said, and swung out of the store.

There would be trouble all right, the

kind of trouble Ed Darley didn't know how to handle. He went on to his print shop, trying not to think of what was ahead, but it clung in his mind with grim tenacity. He'd never have taken the mayor's job if he'd known, but he had taken it, and now the trouble was in his lap.

He unlocked the door and went in, the rich familiar smells of paper and ink coming to him. He glanced around the cluttered shop, smiling a little as he thought how different this was from the hurly-burly in the office of the big dailies where he had worked before he'd come to Pine City. They'd told him he was crazy, that he'd wash out in a month and be back looking for a job, but he hadn't. Everything had been all right until Galt Lytell had showed up.

Ed went through the shop to the room in the back where he cooked most of his meals and slept. He built a fire and put a pan of water on the stove to heat; he took off his shirt and was lathering his face when he heard the front door open. Annoyed, he stepped out of his room, wishing he had locked the door. He had no time now to visit. He stopped, flat-footed, the shaving brush in his hand, the annoyance becoming anger. It was Galt Lytell.

"Evening, Ed," Lytell said in his cultured voice.

"Evening, Galt," Ed said, thinking that culture had little place in Pine City, Lytell's kind of culture, anyhow.

LYTELL came on past the press and the paper cutter, smiling genially. He had a way, this Galt Lytell, a way that had fooled a lot of folks. He was in his late thirties, Ed judged, a handsome debonaire man who oozed a synthetic good nature all the way from his sleek black hair to his polished button shoes.

"Let's see," Lytell said in an offhand way, "we have a meeting tonight."

"That's right," Ed said, and added grudgingly, "come on back and sit down."

"Slicking up, are you?" Lytell smiled as he took the chair Ed motioned to.

"Getting a good meal for a change." Ed paused, and then added, "At Nina's place."

"A good meal all right," Lytell agreed. "She's the best cook in the country. I'll swear to that."

There was no talk for a moment while Ed moved the pan of water to the table next to the wall and angled the mirror to catch as much of the fading light as possible. He dipped his brush and beat up a lather, watching Lytell in the mirror, a tension working into him. Obviously the man had not come for a friendly visit.

Lytell took a cigar out of his pocket and bit off the end. "You're a good newspaper man, Darley. I was both surprised and pleased to find you in Pine City."

"Thanks," Ed said, and began lathering his face.

Lytell fired his cigar. "I don't need to tell you how much a good newspaper has to do with the development of a country like this Storm River Valley." He canted his chair back against the wall, dark eyes squeezing almost shut. "I dropped in for a couple of reasons, Darley. One is to order a hundred subscriptions for a year. That will be two hundred dollars, won't it?"

Ed had started to shave. He turned, razor poised in the air. "That's right. You must plan to do a lot of reading."

Lytell laughed. He counted out two hundred dollars in currency and laid it on the table. "No, one copy will do me. I want to mail them to Middle Western towns so I'll have some customers next year. I'll have water on the land within a few months unless bad weather holds us up, and this is the cheapest advertising I can get. Naturally I expect you to give us our due."

There was silence for a moment ex-

cept for the scratching of the razor blade against Ed's cheek. Then he wiped the blade on a piece of paper, gaze pinned on Lytell's face. He said, "Let's get one thing straight. That two hundred dollars will come in handy, but it won't buy any favors."

"Why, of course," Lytell said heartily. "The press is incorruptible. All I want is a story every week on our progress. That'll be news for all your readers. However, keep in mind that you found this town with a population of two or three hundred, but you'll see two or three thousand here within a year. Why?" He wagged a forefinger at Ed. "Because my company is spending money in this valley, a lot of money. As the town grows, your newspaper will grow."

Ed went on shaving. It was growth he could do without. As he had told Nina, he liked the town the way it was, but there was no use telling Lytell that. He had always been a realist and he was now, but that didn't mean a man had to close his eyes to the evil Galt Lytell was sponsoring on River Street.

Lytell rose. "One more thing, Darley. I've heard there is a movement on foot to raise the licenses for saloons. That strikes me as being unfair."

Ed wiped his razor again, understanding why Lytell had come. He said, "I don't think so. Now you know how I stand." He motioned to the money on the table. "You can cancel those subscriptions if you want to."

"No, but I will admit I am disappointed in your attitude. The people who live here are stockmen. Nothing is important to them but cows and grass and horses and guns. You and I know that there are other things which are important."

Lytell turned and went out without another word. Ed stood motionless until he heard the street door close, then turned back to the mirror and finished shaving. Galt Lytell was not a man to make open

threats; still the threat had been there, subtle but unmistakable.

At that moment Ed Darley had the feeling he was standing in the bed of Storm River in flood time, the water cold and black and rising around him. The safe way was to climb out while he still had time. Or he could stay and pit his strength against the pressure of the current. If he did, and made one slip, he was finished.

CHAPTER

2

Council Meeting

Ed knew he would be late and Nina wouldn't like it. She was the only woman he had ever known who made punctuality a fetish, but he had no choice. The sheriff's office in the courthouse would be closed, so he turned toward the side street that led to Mrs. Riley's boarding house where the deputy, Pete Hackett, lived. Red Castle was the sheriff, but he was a cowman who lived five miles up the river. He had been elected with the tacit agreement that he could stay on his ranch unless something important came up. Ordinarily the sheriff's business was left in the hands of his young deputy.

As Ed rounded the corner he almost ran into Jake Wade, the town marshal. Wade said, "Howdy, Darley."

"Evening, marshal," Ed said, and would have gone on if Wade had not motioned for him to stop.

"Ever visited River Street?" Wade asked.

The marshal's tone was casual, too casual. Ed hesitated, wondering what was in Wade's mind. The man had been hired by the council shortly after Lytell had started operations in early spring. Lytell had recommended him, and now Ed considered it the biggest mistake the council had made since he had been elected mayor. Jake Wade was a gunslick, a killer, the kind who drifted from one

boomtown to another, making his .45 earn his living. Both Castle and Hacket considered him the poorest kind of a law officer, a fact which Wade knew and coolly disregarded.

"Sure, I've been there," Ed said.

Wade's pale blue eyes probed Ed. "I reckon you're the kind who calls himself a crusader, ain't you, Darley?"

Ed gave him a thin grin. "I'm surprised you know the word, marshal."

Wade laughed. "I didn't till Galt said you was one. He's educated, Darley. Likewise he's purty tough, though you wouldn't know it just to look at im."

"I judged that he is," Ed said.

"Well then, maybe you'd like to know what he thinks about crusaders. He says this burg ain't got room for 'em except in boothill, which same counts mayors and newspaper editors."

Ed knew then that this meeting was no accident. Wade was making the threat that Galt Lytell had not wanted to make so bluntly. Ed said, "You're taking the long way around, marshal."

Wade shook his head. "No, I'm hitting the nail right on the head. You've had some stuff in your paper about River Street. You're wrong as hell, mister. Maybe the pot's boiling, but I'm sitting on the lid. Savvy?"

"Three men have been killed in a week." Ed began.

"And I plugged two of 'em. Why? Because I'm keeping things under control. That's why. A barkeep in the Belle Union got the third one because he was busting things up. Now you'd better know what you're talking about after this."

"I'll remember that," Ed said.

Nodding, Wade moved on around the corner, walking with his customary swagger. Ed continued up the street to Mrs. Riley's boarding house, anger smoldering in him. Wade was Lytell's man. Ed had been sure of it, but this was the first

time it had come right out into the open.

Mrs. Riley opened the door to Ed's knock. When he asked for the deputy, she said, "He's eating supper."

"I won't keep him long enough to starve him," Ed said irritably.

She hesitated, eyeing Ed disapprovingly, then muttered, "A body would think you could call some other time than supper," and disappeared into the dining room.

Pete Hacket came to the door a moment later, chewing on a piece of tough steak. He said, "This is a hell of a note."

"Yes it is," Ed agreed, "but it's important. I want you to go get Red soon as you finished your supper. I'd like for you and him to be at the council meeting to-night."

Hacket swallowed and shook his head. "Red's on roundup back of Spring Butte. I couldn't get him here till midnight if I started after him now."

Ed stared at Hacket a moment before he asked, "Sure?"

"Sure I'm sure," Hacket said indignantly. "What do you want us for?"

"I'm expecting trouble. Wade's taking exception to what I wrote in last week's paper about law enforcement on River Street."

Hacket was a young man, freckle-faced, short-tempered, and burning with a deep anger over the whole matter. "Damn it, Ed, you ain't been half as tough on him as you should have been. Three killings in a week, and him on the sending end of the gun two times. We ain't had three killings in this county as long as I've been toting the star till now." He paused, scratching his cheek. "Why don't you town fathers close them hell holes up?"

"I figured we'll start tonight. That's why I wanted you and Red there."

"I'll send somebody after Red and I'll be there," Hacket said. "Maybe this'll be what Red and me have been looking for."

"Thanks," Ed said, and turning away, hurried toward Nina's house.

Doc Waldron opened the door before Ed reached the porch, calling, "Get on your horse, boy. Nina's about to throw it out."

Ed went in and hung his hat on the hall rack. "I figured I'd move faster on foot than on my horse, Doc."

"I guess you would," Nina called from the kitchen. "That crowbait you ride wouldn't even make good coyote feed."

Doc winked. "Be about minutes the last report I had." He motioned toward his office. "Time for a drink."

ED FOLLOWED him into the small corner room that he had used as an office for twenty years. He took a bottle out of his desk drawer, set out two glasses, and poured the drinks. He lifted one, said, "Here's mud in your eye," and drank.

Ed gulped his drink and said, "I assume that's for medicinal purposes."

"You assume correctly," Waldron said genially. "Well, what's on the docket for tonight?"

Waldron was a short pudgy man with a flowing white mustache and cherry-red cheeks. He was the only doctor in the county, and his buggy was a familiar sight anywhere on Storm River, winter or summer, good weather or bad. Because the cattlemen were his friends, he viewed the irrigation developments with suspicion and frankly disliked Galt Lytell.

"Trouble," Ed said, and told him about Lytell's visit and his talk with Wade.

"Damn the day we ever hired that tough," Waldron said heavily. "If Lytell hadn't. . . ."

"Come and get it," Nina called, "If you're able to stagger to the table."

"Now, now," Waldron said reprovingly as he led the way into the dining room, "my snake bite medicine ain't that strong."

There was little talk during supper. It was not, as measured by Nina's standards,

a successful meal. When her peach pie had been eaten, she put her hands on the table, looked from her father to Ed and back. "What's the matter with you two? My best jokes fall on deaf ears. My pie goes unadmired. Have you two got stomach aches?"

Ed gave her a small grin. "Your pie was a culinary masterpiece. I guess it's just the weather."

"Give him a pill, Dad," Nina said. "Or maybe sulphur and molasses."

"An old wives' remedy," Waldron said. "I've got to go over to Beckers, but I'll get to the meeting if I can, Ed."

"You've got to," he said.

Waldron rose. "Babies, death, and taxes don't wait."

After he had gone, Nina asked, "What's wrong, Ed?"

He filled his pipe, taking his time. She had changed to a blue silk dress that accentuated the curves of her young body; she was wearing a string of crystal beads that glittered in the lamplight against the light tan of her throat. He tamped the tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, eyes meeting hers briefly, and it seemed to him she had never been more desirable than she was at this moment.

"Lytell dropped in this evening," he said. "We agreed you were the best cook in the country."

A smile touched the corners of her mouth. "Why, that makes it unanimous, doesn't it?"

"I'm sure it does."

Then the smile was gone. She said sternly, "You didn't answer my question."

He couldn't. She wouldn't understand it if he did. To her life was a gay business to be filled with dancing and swimming, hunting and riding, of being admired and complimented. How could she understand how a man feels when he is promised death if he takes the course he knows he must take? How could she understand that an editor must weigh evil

against good through all his years, that his newspaper must witness to that weighing?

He rose and walked to the window, not wanting her to feel the turmoil that was in him. He said, "I guess Doc and I were pretty poor company tonight. I'm sorry." He fired his pipe, eyes on the spots of light that lay like yellow stains on the black street. She had said this afternoon that they must expect changes in Pine City. She seemed to like Galt Lytell; she had gone to the Saturday night dances in the Oddfellows Hall with him; she had invited him into her home for meals.

She came to stand beside him. "Something is wrong. You've got to tell me, Ed. I know you and Dad don't like Galt, but that doesn't mean there has to be trouble, does there?"

"No." He made a show of looking at his watch. "I've got to go, Nina. Maybe I could take a rain check on the dish washing. Or just leave them and I'll do the job next week."

"I didn't think you were a welsher, Ed Darley. If you think I'm going to leave the dishes for a week." She laughed then. "Oh, go on. You'd probably break every dish I had in the place."

He took his pipe out of his mouth, his eyes on her. Her full lips held a smile at the corners. He thought Galt Lytell would receive that same smile if he were here; there would be an easy flow of talk between them. Lytell was rich. He was handsome and smooth, but his perfect manners covered a deep rottenness that a woman would not sense in time. And Ed Darley could not tell her. Or if he did, she would not believe him.

He turned toward the living room and walked through it to the hall. He took his hat from the rack. She had followed him. He said, "Thanks for a fine meal."

Suddenly she laid her hands on his arms, a spontaneous gesture that was not like her. She said, "Ed, don't forget

you're a newspaper man, not a gunman." He saw then that she understood more about what was going on than he thought. He said, "I'll remember," and went out into the night.

It was nearly eight when Ed reached the little frame building that had served as a town hall for a generation. The blacksmith, Lon Patton, was there, and Pete Hackett came in a moment later. He asked, "Reckon Wade will show up?"

Ed nodded. "He'll be along with Lytell."

The glow of anticipation touched the deputy's face. "I'll handle the shooting. Don't you try no gun play."

"I didn't even bring by gun," Ed said.

"What's this all about?" Patton demanded worriedly.

"Maybe nothing," Ed answered. "We'll have to see. Wade figures I'm finished here."

"Why hell . . ." Patton began, and stopped, chewing on a pendulous lower lip.

ED KNEW how it was with him. It was the same with Joe Becker and Doc Waldron. The combination of a star, a gun and Jake Wade was too much. Ed filled his pipe, glancing speculatively at Pete Hackett. The young deputy was the one curb on Wade, but Ed doubted that he was enough.

Doc Waldron and Joe Becker came in, Waldron saying, "I've got to get back in an hour."

Ed glanced at his watch. "We'll start on time. It's just a couple of minutes." He knew that he could not count on Becker whose mind tonight would be on his wife. Now he wondered about the doctor. Courage ran in strange streaks. Waldron would buck a blizzard for twenty miles to reach a sick man, but standing up to Lytell and Jake Wade was another matter. And he wasn't sure about Lon

Patton. Again his eyes turned to Pete Hackett who was standing by the window, a cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth. He wished that Red Castle was here.

Lytell and Wade came in exactly at eight, Lytell courteously greeting all of them, Wade barren-faced. Ed took his place at the head of the pine table, its top scarred by twenty years of use. He said, "We'll start. Doc and Joe won't be able to stay long."

Wade jabbed a forefinger at Hackett, asking, "What's the kid doing here?"

"I asked him to come," Ed answered. "I wanted the sheriff to be here, but he's on roundup."

"I'm the town marshal," Wade said. "County law-dogs ain't got no business at this meeting."

"You ain't got no business toting the marshal's star, neither," Hackett said, red-faced with anger. "And don't call me kid."

"You can sit down, Jake Wade," Ed said tonelessly, "or you can get out. I asked Pete to come here."

"Sure, it's all right," Lytell said. "Dry up, Jake."

No one but Lytell could have said that without stirring Wade's anger. Ed had never seen a man quite like Jake Wade before, but he sensed the great pride that was in the man, the harsh temper that lay so near the surface. Wade dropped into a chair beside Lytell and rolled a smoke, pale eyes on young Hackett.

The rest took chairs, and Ed said, "We'll dispense with the usual preliminaries due to the short time that Doc and Joe can be here. There is one important proposal that we have to thresh out tonight. Several taxpayers have approached me the last few days with the suggestion that the license fee for saloons, gambling places, and dance halls be raised to one thousand dollars. They seem to feel that

additional expenses such as the marshal's salary will be too much for our present income."

"If that is the only objection," Lytell said, "I'll pay the marshal's salary myself. Bringing him to Pine City was my idea."

"I'm afraid so," Doc Waldron said hotly, "and a hell of a mistake it was. I don't know yet how we came to play footsie with you, Lytell."

"You wanted a man to keep the toughs in line. He's done that."

"You're damned right I have," Wade said, his tone challenging as his pale eyes raked Waldron. "If you boys are after my scalp, I want to know it."

"Well, damn it to hell," Hackett cried. "All the council's got to do is to fire this killing son."

Wade jumped up. "Kid, I ain't. . ."

"Sit down," Ed said evenly, "or get out. We've had order at these meetings and we'll have it tonight."

Wade turned smoldering eyes on Ed, and for a moment Ed thought that this was it. Since he had come to Storm River he had not been able to understand an outworn code by which a man like Jake Wade could say, "Put on your gun and shoot it out with me, or drift." It was that brutal. There would be only the two choices. Walk out and lose his business, his friends, his last chance with Nina. Or he could fight and die. He had no middle course, for if he stayed and refused to fight, he would be branded, and no man could stand the pressure that would be laid against him, the talk, the averted eyes.

It was the vestigial remains of the old dueling code which went back through centuries of civilization, a strange standard for this age, but a real one. Ed had seen it work twice in the three years he had been here, and both times men had died in Pine City's short Main Street. The law had not touched the killers in either case. A fair fight, everyone had said,

and Ed had written it up in the Herald that way, the thought never entering his mind that someday he might be on the receiving end himself, but he had thought many times how wrong it was. The answer, he knew, lay in the land and its people, a land where the stealing of a horse was a greater crime than the taking of a human life.

BUT it did not come now. Lytell said, "Sit down, Jake. Ed's right." Wade dropped back into his chair, and Lytell went on, "You gentlemen know that my establishments on River Street will have to close if you slap this license fee on them."

"That's the object," Waldron said testily. "We were all carried away by your promises, Lytell. We saw a big city here on Storm River, homes for a thousand families and all that. Now we've seen where you're taking us and we don't like it."

"You'll have to be a little more definite, Doc," Lytell said softly. "Just where am I taking you?"

"To hell," Waldron said. "I reckon I've been called to River Street more than anyone else here except Wade. I've tried to patch up men shot to pieces in drunken brawls. I've seen the bodies of men who committed suicide because their families were starving and had lost their wages back to you by bucking your crooked games."

Wade pounded the table with his fists. "You're a damned liar, sawbones. Them games are on the square."

Waldron's face was purple with rage. "Liar, am I? Why. . ."

"Just a minute, Doc," Lytell cut in. "Suppose we go in a body to River Street. You can inspect the games yourself, sample my liquor, and visit the dance halls. I'm not afraid of what you'll find. You see, there's one thing you forget. I'm here to put in an irrigation project, not to

run River Street, as you may think."

"Then give it up," Ed said.

Lytell shook his head. "I've got to give my men a place to blow off steam." He waved a hand toward River Street, the din of shouts and tinny music and loud laughter a constant racket that would not die until after midnight. "I provide them with amusement because they work better if they have it. Remember that when the job is done, River Street will evaporate like morning dew under a hot sun."

"Meanwhile we've got the hell," Waldron said doggedly, "and what's more, some of our boys I've known all their lives are going with it. Ben Hackett's place ain't good enough for them now."

"Oh hell," Wade said. "He ain't fooling nobody, Galt. Tell him he ain't."

Lytell's face had lost its customary good humor. He said bitterly, "No, you're not fooling us, Doc. You're with the cattlemen who want me to fail because they want to use the government land for winter range that I'm going to see will be farmed. It's the same issue, not two as you would have us think." He motioned to young Hackett. "Same with him. His dad is going broke. With River Street gone, his business will boom."

Waldron glanced at his watch. "I've got to get along, Ed. This palaver is getting nowhere. I move that we tax every saloon, dance hall, and gambling place one thousand dollars per license, beginning the first of the year. That'll give Lytell time to move his hell holes out of town."

"But not out of the county," Lytell smiled thinly. "Won't work, Doc."

"It'll work," young Hackett said. "Wade won't be no help once you're out of town. Red and me will see to that."

"Is there a second to the motion?" Ed asked.

"I'll second the motion just to get a vote," Lytell said complacently. "Usually

a man is supposed to vote for a motion he seconds, but I won't. I want to see how everybody stands on this thing." He nodded at Becker. "Your business has doubled since I came to Storm River. And Lon here." He motioned to the blacksmith. "He's had more mules and horses to shoe in the last three months than he's had for ten years."

"All in favor of the motion say aye," Ed said.

Doc Waldron said aye. That was all. Patton was looking absently across the room. Joe Becker was fiddling with his watch chain. Ed said, "Those against the motion say aye."

Lytell shouted "Aye." Patton and Becker added theirs in weaker voices. Then Patton added apologetically, "Don't seem real fair to me, Ed. Lytell here has done a lot for this country. I want to see him finish his job."

Ed tried to mask the feeling of failure that swept through him. He should have sounded Patton out before the meeting. He should have taken a stronger course in his editorials in the Herald. He should have waited until Mrs. Becker had her baby and perhaps Joe would have seen it differently. It was too late now.

Lytell said with biting malice, "I guess that settles this business, Darley. Anything else to come up?"

"No," Ed said tonelessly. "Meeting's adjourned."

Waldron rose and kicked back his chair. "I hope your kid don't take after you, Joe," and stalked out. Becker followed him without a word. Patton rose, ran the tip of his tongue over dry lips, started to say something, and decided against it. He swung out of the room.

Lytell grinned at Ed. "You are a fool, Darley, a complete, unmitigated fool."

"Me and Red ain't done," Pete Hackett shouted, so angry his words were almost incoherent. "Wade, if you kill another man, I'll arrest you for murder."

"That's a downright ugly word," Wade said complacently, "but I don't think you will. I stay in my ballywick. You stay in yours."

Lytell said, "Good night, mayor." He moved to the door, stopped and turned back. "It just occurred to me, Ed, that maybe you should put all your time on your newspaper. Kind of a dangerous job being mayor right now."

"I'm not resigning," Ed said hotly, "if that's what you mean."

"It was just an idea," Lytell said, and went out, Wade behind him.

Hackett's fists knotted. "Ed, why don't you and your council fire that killing son?"

"You think there'd be enough courage to fire him?" Ed asked. "After what you just saw?"

"No, I guess not." The deputy swore bitterly. "I thought Becker and Patton had more guts."

"Becker's getting his first baby and Patton's making a lot of money."

Ed knew he was making excuses for them, but excuses weren't enough. The cowmen like Red Castle stood for their own tough kind of law because they were tough themselves. They had stuck together through all the years back to the days of the vigilantes and marauding Indian bands. That was the reason he had felt so strongly his own inadequacies, but now he felt an inward pride. When the chips were down, he had not backed up; he felt a kinship with Doc Waldron and contempt for Joe Becker and Lon Patton.

"Naw, that ain't the trouble with 'em," young Hackett said. "If a man ain't got guts, he ain't got 'em and that's all there is to it." He moved toward the door and then turned back. "Ed, I've got a hunch I can bust Wade. I may need your help."

Ed took a long breath, wondering if a man was ever free from these choices. It was again a case of weighing good against

evil, his safety against the thing he stood for. He said, "I'll be in the shop if you want me, Pete."

CHAPTER

Proof

3

Ed returned to his print shop, the racket from River Street adding to the tension that tightened his nerves. Until Lytell had come, Pine City had been a quiet place for six nights out of the week. Only on Saturday evenings when cowboys from the Storm River spreads hit town was the usual placid tenor of life disturbed. That was to be expected and it was not vicious. This was different, so different that Jake Wade should do something about it. The killings he had committed the week before were not the answer. Walking along the deserted street, Ed wondered exactly what lay back of those killings.

As Ed lighted a lamp he remembered Pete Hacket saying he hadn't been as hard on Wade as he should have been. Well, he would be now. The way he saw it, a newspaper should not only tell the truth; it should point a direction.

Ed paced the length of his office again and again, thinking about this, forming sentences in his mind and discarding them. Time went by, unmeasured. Finally the pattern of his editorial formed and he began to set type, hand moving from type case to stick and back again in regular rhythm. When he had finished, he read it, backwards as a printer learns to do. Then he heard the door open and he swung around, apprehension striking at him. He should have kept his gun where he could put his hand on it immediately. He relaxed at once. It was Nina who had come in.

He asked, "Aren't you up kind of late?"

"I don't need any beauty sleep tonight," she said, and came across the room to him.

She shivered, for the night had turned cold and she had put nothing on over her blue dress. Her cheeks were bright with color; she was trying to make her lips hold a small smile, but the usual flippancy was gone from her.

"What's keeping you awake?" he asked.

"You ought to know." She sat down, her hands folded on her lap. "Mrs. Becker had a girl. Joe feels pretty bad. He wanted a boy."

"Is she all right?"

Nina nodded. "Both of them. But Joe isn't. And Dad isn't. Mrs. Patton was there, so they didn't need me. Dad wouldn't tell me what happened. I mean at the meeting. You've got to tell me."

He did, briefly, and added, "Now I suppose you'll say that Lytell is an upright honest man."

"Ed, you . . ." she began angrily, then stopped. "I guess I deserved that. What are you going to do?"

"Beginning with this week's issue, the *Herald* will tell its readers about River Street," he said somberly. "I just composed an editorial."

"You can't do it," she said. "You can't fight a gun with a printing press. I know how it will go." She made a small gesture as if she were suddenly very tired. "Ed, this country hasn't grown up yet."

"Joe Becker hasn't either," he said. "Neither's Lon Patton. Your dad was the only one. . . ."

"I know," she broke in. "He's like Pete Hacket and Red Castle, but maybe they're wrong. It's not right to legalize murder by calling it a gun fight."

"What are you getting at?" he demanded.

"I'm thinking of some good men who died because they were slow with a gun." She leaned forward. "Ed, suppose Wade forces a gun fight onto you?"

He saw the worry on her face, and for the first time he sensed a depth of under-

standing in her that he had not known she possessed. There had been few serious moments between them.

"I guess I'll have to oblige him," he said.

"And you'll die just when we need you. It's no good, Ed. Don't think that Becker and Patton turned yellow tonight. You don't know how it is to have a wife. Neither does Dad. Neither does Pete Hacket. And Red Castle doesn't care." She got up and came to him. "Listen, Ed. I know how women feel about losing the men they love. Tonight, Edith Becker had a baby for her husband. Hasn't she a right to ask her husband to stay alive?"

"I hadn't thought of it that way," he admitted, "but it hasn't got anything to do with me. Maybe a printing press isn't a very good weapon against a gun, but it's the best I've got."

"You think it hasn't got anything to do with you?" she whispered. "Ed, you're blind."

There was no sauciness about her now, no flippancy. She was telling him as plainly as she could that she loved him, but she was asking a price, a price he could not pay. He said, "I love you. I guess I've loved you from the first day I saw you. I didn't tell you all the truth this afternoon when I said I wanted my own business and I didn't like a city. The big reason I've stayed here is because I wanted to make a life for you in your own country. That is, if you'd have me. Then Lytell came along and you seemed to like him."

She stamped her foot angrily. "You are blind. I don't like Lytell, but you and I weren't engaged and there wasn't any reason I shouldn't go with him once in awhile."

He grinned down at her. She had inadvertently told him something else, something he should have known from the first. It was the old feminine maneu-

ver of trying to attract one man by smiling at another.

"I'm sure glad to hear that. When this is over, I'm going to ask you to marry me, even though it will mean a pretty tough life for you."

"Why don't you ask me now?"

"We've got to get rid of Wade and River Street. Maybe it'll be a good thing if Lytell puts in his irrigation project, but he can't run Pine City."

SHE would have said something else if Pete Hacket had not come in. She turned away from Ed, trying to mask the turbulence of her feelings, and not altogether succeeding.

"I've got it, Ed," Hacket called. "Come on. We're paying River Street a visit. Get your gun."

"No," Nina cried. "What does Ed know about gunfighting?"

Hacket glowered at her. "You're like all women, ain't you? Well, you've got Ed sized up wrong. He shoots mighty damned straight."

Ed moved between them, asking, "What's up?"

Hacket grinned proudly. "I've had a hunch all along that them killings of Wade's wasn't like he said. Tonight I got hold of a gambler in the Belle Union. Come over to the jail and hear what he's got to say."

Ed moved toward his desk, opened the drawer and lifted his gun from it. Then he dropped it and shook his head. "Maybe I don't need a gun at that, Pete. Are you aiming to arrest Wade?"

"That's exactly what I'm going to do," Hacket snapped. "He may be city marshal, but he sure as hell don't have the privilege of shooting a man just because he totes a star."

"Did you send for Castle?"

Hacket nodded. "But I don't figure he'll come in tonight. We've got to do this job now."

Ed nodded. Another day might mean another killing. "I'd better go with him, Nina. You can read about it in the Herald."

"If you're alive," she said tonelessly.

She made no motion to leave. Ed went out with Hacket, wanting to look back at her and knowing he could not. The biggest mistake he had made was not telling her months ago that he loved her. Now it might be too late.

The county jail was a small building behind the courthouse. Hacket opened the front door and lighted a lamp. He gave Ed a crooked grin. "You may raise hell about this being legal, but we ain't never worried too much about what's legal. Not when we've got to fight fire with fire like we do now. Looks to me like your city council ain't gonna be no help with Patton and Becker siding Lytell."

Ed said nothing. It was another example of this country not growing up. He followed Hacket along the corridor to a cell that held a gambler who was known as Silk. He was a tall, carefully-groomed man who sometimes invited Doc Waldron and Joe Becker to his hotel room for a private game. Ed had sat in a few times. Now Silk was anything but well groomed. His coat was torn, two buttons had been ripped off his shirt, and his face was a mass of livid bruises.

When the gambler saw Ed, he cried, "Get me out of here, Darley. Tell this maniac I haven't broken any laws."

"He's broken one law as sure as hell," Hacket said grimly. "He's been withholding information from the sheriff's office. Don't fret none about him being beat up." Hacket held the lamp high, grinning cockily. "He made me a little trouble when I arrested him."

Ed's first impulse was to reprimand Hacket, to tell him that a law officer was bound by certain legal restraints, but he didn't say it. He couldn't prove that Hacket had beaten the gambler to make

him talk. Besides, he was thinking about the men that Wade had killed. Both had had families. Now, if the families stayed in Pine City, they would have to be taken care of through the winter.

"I didn't give him no trouble," Silk whimpered. "Get me out of here, Darley."

"You'll be out in the morning," Hacket promised. "Maybe sooner. Right now you're telling Ed what you told me."

"Go to hell," Silk snarled.

"All right," Hacket handed the lamp to Ed. "I'll get the key and take you out of there. What happened to you, a while ago was just a starter."

"You going to let him, Darley?" Silk demanded.

"Did you go to the funerals this week?" Ed demanded.

"Hell no, I . . ."

"I did," Ed said softly. "I also talked to the widows. Near as I can get the story, the men who were killed were teamsters working for Lytell. They came here because they'd been promised twice the wages Lytell was actually paying. They weren't making enough to get along, so they got the notion they'd try to make a little more in the Belle Union to buy groceries for their kids. That's why I'm not of a mind to stop Pete if you know something I ought to know."

Silk gripped the bars, his one good eye mirroring the fear that gripped him. He said, "Wade will kill me if I talk."

"Not if he's in the jug waiting to be hanged," Hacket said. "Now talk, damn it."

The gambler took a long sighing breath, glancing at Ed's face and seeing no hope there. "All right. Bill Farrar came in late one night, a little drunk, I guess. He tried the wheel and lost a month's wages. Then he raised hell to Lytell and Lytell had him throwed out. He came back about an hour later after the games were closed. The place was empty except for Wade and me and a couple of bartenders.

Farrar had a gun and he asked for Lytell, saying he was going to kill him. Wade shot him without giving him a chance to draw.

Hacket pinned his eyes on Ed. "That enough?"

"Plenty," Ed said.

HACKET walked back along the corridor to the front office and put the lamp down. He said, "I don't figure Wade will make any trouble with you along. He couldn't take any chances plugging you, especially if you ain't totin' a gun."

Ed nodded. "Let's get the job over with. Pete."

"Now that's talking," Hacket said.

It was well after midnight when Ed and young Hacket reached River Street. All the lights except those in the Belle Union had winked out and the block seemed strangely quiet. Ed followed Hacket into the big saloon. It was empty except for a couple of bartenders and Jake Wade.

Ed had been here several times, and now, as always, the gaudiness of the place struck him. Lytell had freighted in the ornate mahogany bar, the expensive chandeliers, and the games from Shaniko, the railhead nearly a hundred miles to the north. The man undoubtedly had a big investment here, too big to move out the moment the irrigation project was completed.

Wade moved away from the bar, pale blue eyes questioning. He said, "We didn't figure you boys would be in tonight to look things over. Galt invited the city council." He nodded at Ed. "This kid don't qualify."

"This isn't a council visit," Ed said. "It's sheriff's business."

Wade laughed shortly. "Now ain't that a hell of a note. I told you tonight that the sheriff and his kid star totter can stay in their ballywick and I'll stay in mine."

Hacket stood with his back to the bar. It was a mistake, Ed thought, for both aprons had moved along the mahogany until they stood directly behind the deputy. Fear ran like a prickly chill down Ed Darley's back, the fear of a man who finds the reality of a dangerous situation a good deal different from the way he had mentally pictured it. He saw, too, that fear had suddenly gripped Hacket. His face was pale, the corners of his mouth were trembling a little. It was his first real chance to play big, but he was too inexperienced to pull it off. They should have waited for Red Castle.

"You're under arrest, Wade," Hacket said, his voice lacking the authority it should have carried. "I'm taking you in for the murder of Bill Farrar."

Ed moved to the bar. He said softly, "You two stay out of this."

Neither bartender seemed to hear. Wade was laughing, making a show of his contempt. He said, "I ain't going to rot in your damned jail, kid. Not in my own town."

"You have no evidence that it was murder, Hacket," Lytell called. "Get out of here or I'll shoot you. It's time you and your cattleman sheriff know how we stand."

Ed had not seen Lytell come out of a back room. Lytell moved along the bar until he stood twenty feet from the deputy, expressionless black eyes pinned on Hacket.

"This is none of your put in, Lytell," Ed said angrily. "It's murder all right. I just talked to Silk. Before the trial's done, we'll have River Street locked up. Then maybe you'll be satisfied to restrict yourself to your work on the irrigation project."

"Unbuckle your gun belt, Wade," Hacket said, "and let it drop. Then walk out of here. If you make a wrong move I'll kill you."

Hacket reached for his gun, still watch-

ing Wade. Lytell called, "I'm your man, Hackett."

The deputy wheeled toward Lytell. As he turned, Wade pulled his gun. Ed cried, "Watch Wade. . . ." He was too late. The marshal's gun seemed to jump out of leather to meet his downswEEPing hand. He shot once. It was enough, for Hackett went down, his own .45 unfired.

For a moment Ed stood stunned by the criminal unfairness of it. Then he jumped toward Hackett and knelt at his side, hand reaching for his wrist. The deputy was still alive, but blood was spreading across his shirt.

A terrible anger was in Ed Darley then, a feral anger that burned all the way through him, but his mind was functioning with stark clarity. They would get at the gambler Silk and keep him from testifying. Even if Pete Hackett died, it would not be called murder. There were the four of them to testify that the deputy had drawn his gun and Wade had shot in self defense.

Ed was feeling of Hackett's pulse, Lytell's words beating against his ears, "You've been a damned fool right down the line, Darley. You could have played with us, but no, you had to prove the fine old legend that the press is incorruptible."

Lytell was moving toward him, slowly. Ed did not look up. Hackett's dropped gun lay a foot from his right hand. Here was the final weighing of good against evil, an evil that must be rooted out or it would fasten itself upon this town and this valley. Ed could not face a man like Jake Wade and draw fast enough to have any chance at all, but he could shoot straight if the gun was in his hand. Now time seemed to stand still. Ed Darley's life, his future, his happiness—everything was condensed into this one vital moment. Then he made his choice.

Ed swept Hackett's .45 up in his right hand and tilted it just as Lytell was

drawing a short-barrelled gun from a shoulder holster. Ed fired, feeling the jolt of the heavy gun, the buck of it against his palm, and through the cloud of smoke he saw Lytell go back a step and sag and fall.

It was instinct that send Ed rolling back toward the bar to be out of range of the barmen's sawed-off shotguns. He expected Wade's slug to smash life out of him, but it didn't come until he had made the complete roll and faced him. Then the bullet hit him, driving through his chest with the numbing impact of a downswEEPing club.

NEITHER Lytell nor Wade had expected any real opposition from Ed, not as they would have from men like Pete Hackett and Red Castle who had been raised in this country. He was a newspaper man; his weapon was a press. It was the shock of surprise that had held Wade's fire for an instant, a very important instant, an instant that gave life to Ed Darley.

Again he squeezed trigger, the slug breaking Wade's right arm and sending his gun skittering across the floor. Then Red Castle's great voice boomed into the throbbing echoes of gunfire, "Stand pat, all of you." Ed felt the black fog sweep in upon him; he tried to fight it back as he glimpsed the sheriff and Doc Waldron rush in through the batwings, but he could not pull himself together. He fell flat on his face.

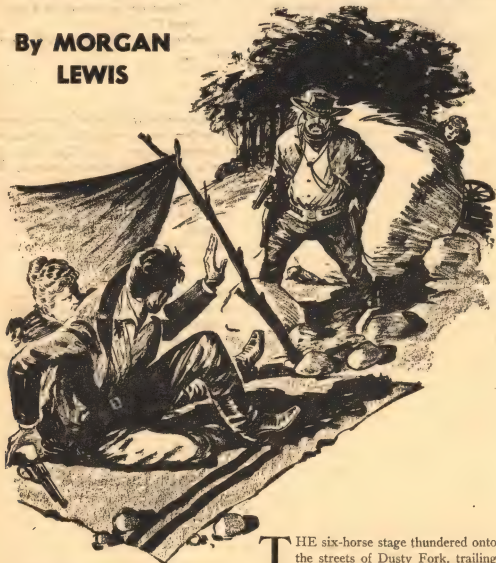
It was daylight when Ed came to, although the lamp was still burning on a bureau. He stirred, struggling up through those shifting layers of fog that grew steadily lighter. His chest felt as if a great pine had dropped upon him, then his breath seemed to come easier, and he saw Nina sitting beside his bed with an anxious look on her face.

"Pete?" Ed asked.

(Please continue on page 128)

HARDSHIP TRAIL

By **MORGAN
LEWIS**



His hand was slipping down to the gun.

Young Steve Fletcher thought he'd lost his calico queen—until he was caught off-guard by a murder-minded road agent.

THE six-horse stage thundered onto the streets of Dusty Fork, trailing a dragon's tail of dust. Steve Fletcher, braced on the high seat beside Baldy, the driver, stared at the false-fronted Stockmens Hotel in passing and kept his hand locked on the seat iron. Wind pressure bent up his hat's wide brim and flapped the open collar of his blue shirt. Saddled horses danced nervously at tie-rails and threatened to bolt.

Baldy kept up his mad pace for two

blocks and flourished to a stop before the stage company's office. He flung the reins to a hostler and dragged a shirt sleeve across his sweaty forehead, while a great onpouring of dust coated them with its fine haze.

Steve grinned, looked back to see that his coat and bag were still there, and climbed down. Baldy grunted as he came down over the front wheel and Steve asked, "How soon you goin' back?"

Baldy chewed the end off a cigar and stuck it in his mouth. "Just soon as I have me a drink an' they hitch in fresh horses—'bout fifteen minutes."

A restrained excitement glinted in Steve's gray eyes. He stretched to get the tension from his long body which had the hard angularity of youth. "I'll walk on to the railroad station," he said. "You're goin' to stop there for baggage?"

Baldy nodded. "What's your all-fired hurry? Too hot to walk."

"Get the kinks out of my legs." Steve started off and stopped. "Don't throw off my coat and bag," he said over his shoulder. "Likely I'll be goin' back with you."

He tramped along the hot plank walk, the long legs of his gray pants firmly round over the tops of his sharp-heeled boots. A blazing afternoon sun drew moisture onto the flat planes of his smooth brown face and bit through his shirt. Above the shirt collar a crescent of white scalp betrayed a fresh haircut.

He walked a block-and-a-half and came out upon the cinder platform of the station. A hump-topped trunk was upended in a shimmer of heat. He inspected it and went into the station to consult the agent. When he came out he leaned against a shady corner, rolled a cigarette with damp fingers and smoked until the stage rolled up.

Baldy got down and came around to undo the lashings on the boot. Steve hoisted the trunk to his shoulder and, when Baldy lifted the canvas, eased it in. Seeing the

name "Laura Dunham" stenciled on its side, Baldy grunted as he hauled back on a rope, "Same one as vis'ted the Fishers last summer?"

"You've got a good memory," Steve said.

"Wouldn't need much of a mem'ry to rec'lect her." Baldy finished and pulled down the canvas. He stepped back, shut one eye and slyly regarded Steve across his bulbous nose, seeing the significance of haircut and new shirt. "You seem to have a pretty good mem'ry yourself—I reckon you'll be goin' back with me?"

"I reckon," Steve drawled and felt heat crawl into his neck and ears.

"Well," Baldy pondered, "she's a mighty pretty girl, but wild. Like a range colt. I mind her bustin' 'round Rosebud in levis and a man's shirt last summer. Scand'lised some of the old folks, I reckon, but she could ride good. 'Bout seventeen or eighteen?"

"Just eighteen this month—the tenth." Then, seeing Baldy's grin, he blushed. "Aw, go fly a kite!" He flipped away his cigarette. "Come on, she's waiting at the hotel."

Baldy hoisted himself to the seat, Steve stepped inside and the stage rolled on to the Stockmens Hotel. Steve mopped his face with a bandanna and wondered how Laura would act. She'd probably let out a cowboy yell and come charging at him. And what would she do when he showed her the mare he had gentled for her? It had a rocking-chair gait and was gentle as a baby, the result of long and patient training. He wiped the moisture from his hands. She probably hadn't changed much. But a year was a long time.

Laura Dunham was on the porch of the two-story ramshackle hotel and, even in its shade, her face had a kind of brightness. The proprietor, fat Jim Bates, who never took an unnecessary step, was carrying her bag.

Steve jumped out and started forward,

hand outstretched, but as these two moved into sunlight on the warped and paintless steps, he stopped dead and his hand slowly fell. This tall girl who swayed so sedately down to him was like no one he had ever seen before. Sunlight glinted on her stylish brown dress of fine silk and on her richly brown hair under the small hat.

"Steve," she murmured, "how nice. What brings you to Dusty Fork?" A jeweled brooch glittered at her breast and her pink nails held a polished sheen. Her brown eyes still had the sparkle of old wine but her face and neck were a pale cream. Where was last year's deep tan?

"I—I had business." Her contained manner confused him and made him feel ashamed of his excitement.

Laura smiled at him, charmingly; smiled at Bates as he tossed her bag up on top of the stage; smiled at Baldy as he craned over the side. Last year she had been a pretty kid. Now she was beautiful—and a woman. A woman's poise and reserve enveloped Miss Dunham, shielding her from the rude world, as the flowered parasol she now erected protected her from the sun.

Jim Bates sighed, "Have a good trip," and waddled reluctantly up the steps, but not before Laura had given him her finger tips in the manner of royalty offering a hand to be kissed. And as she half-turned Steve saw something that completely floored him. The back of her brown dress and its sash were hiked up as though—it can't be, he thought dazedly, and had a swift picture of her in levis. And then he remembered hearing Sally Fisher say something about the style women were wearing. Bustles!

But Laura was making polite conversation with Baldy. "How far is it to Rosebud? Last year it seemed like such a long trip."

Steve pulled himself together and tried to get back on the old easy footing. "It just seems long," he drawled. "Baldy's

stage often times has got square wheels."

There was a delightful little crinkle across her nose when she smiled and her lips parted exactly. Last year this humor would have folded her up and had her gasping.

AND then Steve saw Will Greener come down the street carrying a shotgun and the significance of it bore in on him and changed his thinking. He thought, there's more than passengers this trip. Greener paused by the express station and the agent came out carrying a chest which he swung into the stage. Greener climbed to his high rear seat and put the gun across his knees.

The heat was sending a moist trickle down Steve's face and he lifted his voice to Baldy. "Any more passengers?"

"Old Lon Elliott an' his missus." Baldy licked down a loose wrapper on his cigar. "Come up yesterday to do some shoppin' that couldn't be did in Rosebud. For the weddin', I reckon—here they are."

Steve had known the Elliots all his life, but now, as they crossed the dusty road, he realized suddenly how old they were. A clerk followed them across with a box which he lifted up to Baldy. Lon Elliott, originally from Virginia, swept his black stockman's hat from his white head and made a deep bow to Laura. His tall, gaunt frame was stooped and time and the weather had grooved his cheeks. His black suit hung on him with a comfortable looseness.

Ma Elliott, frail in a black dress, said, "My, it's nice to see you back, Laura. Sally Fisher is a lucky girl to have such a pretty bridesmaid. You must be plumb tuckered, coming all the way from Chicago."

"Oh, no. Nothing bothers—it was rather trying." She gave Steve a sidelong look. "And smoke and cinders are so bad for the complexion."

"I reckon they be," Ma Elliott said in

a startled voice and let her husband help her into the coach. "It bothers me some to ride backwards," she said as Laura came in. "If you're like me, Lonsberry can set in front."

"I don't mind riding backwards," Laura said, and the two ladies gathered their skirts as the men came in. Baldy kicked off the brake and clucked, the stage lurched forward and resumed its bouncing and swaying as the big wheels took the ruts. Baldy always left town with a flourish.

The streets of Dusty Fork frayed out and then the horses were moving steadily through open country baked and bleached by summer's heat. Late afternoon sun slanted through the window laying its hot brightness on those within. Dust swirled and eddied, sifting its golden motes into the coach. Ahead, the dark and ragged line of hills mounted upwards, wave after wave, thrusting their timbered crests against the hot blue sky.

Fifteen minutes after the coach had started, Lon Elliott had gone to sleep, braced upright in his corner. Across from him, Steve was glad to let the conversation of Laura and Ma Elliott flow over him.

Laura had brought the city's bright glitter with her. He sat back and studied her. Where was the girl he had known; the one he had been so close to, who had made everything fun? He felt cheated and he felt hurt. All through the long winter and spring he had had his hopeful thoughts of this girl, and his plans. And during that time she had become a woman, with the city's airs and graces. Nothing in her manner showed that she remembered this closeness and he wondered that she could so quickly forget. Maybe, he thought, it was the loneliness in the bare shack in the hills, where his father had died ten years ago and his mother followed seven years later, that made him dream of wonderful things.

At the top of the first long upgrade, Baldy pulled in to breathe the horses and Steve got out. He mounted the rear wheel, took a gun from his bag and slipped it inside his waistband, while Greener watched him with his dark close look.

Steve asked, "You looking for trouble this trip?"

"Always look for it," Greener said, "when we carry express."

Steve climbed down, put on his coat and buttoned it over the gun. Getting back inside he wished the two women were not making this trip. In the event of a holdup Baldy couldn't just stop and shell out. He would have to run—if he could, for with the express box along, Greener would make a fight of it.

The stage ran up and down grades that grew steeper as the hills mounted. It swayed and banged on rocky stretches where summer rains had gullied the road. Trees now offered some shade and the sun, striking through them, laid moving patterns upon the coach.

"I did quite a bit of riding," Laura told Ma Elliott. "The young man next door to us is studying law in his father's office—he's very ambitious. They have some gaited horses and I rode with him twice a week; but I had to ride side-saddle. He—he didn't approve of my riding astride."

A hot anger uncurled inside Steve at this proper young man from Chicago. He said roughly, "It wouldn't hardly be proper to ride astride in the city...that only goes out here among the ignorant savages!"

There was no mistaking the anger in his voice and Laura turned quickly to look at him. "There are different ways of life for different places," she said reprovingly. "John's not at all stuffy. It's just—just..." She broke off and looked out the window while a spot of color burned in her cheek.

"Well," Ma Elliott said placidly, "we ain't got any gaited horses but this is a

good place to catch a husband. Girls are scarce."

Laura did not turn her head.

Steve knew he had hurt her but his anger goaded him. He said, "This country is hard on women and horses—but mostly women. You'll do better back where you belong."

"I really don't expect to be here long,"

Laura spoke directly to Ma Elliott, her voice coolly ignoring Steve. "I only came out to see Sally married. You know she was my best friend when she lived in Chicago."

Steve rolled a cigarette with fingers that were stiff. He had started a fight with her for no reason whatsoever and she had handed it right back to him. At least, he thought dismally, now he knew. She was going to marry this lawyer chap back in the city. His eyes dropped to her fingers half-curved in her lap. There was no ring—but she wouldn't wear it on a trip like this. Maybe it was on a ribbon around her neck.

He remembered how brown her fingers had been when he had tried to teach her to shoot. But Laura had been better with a rock than a gun. She had knocked cans off the corral bar with remarkable accuracy, throwing sidearm like a boy. The trouble with her shooting had been that she shut her eyes when she pulled trigger.

THE stage ran down a mild grade and started steeply up. Here the jaws of the mountains closed round them, screening the low-riding sun so that they moved in a world of blue shadows. The cool, ancient smells of these hills swirled up from pine and hemlock.

Steve put his head out the window and surveyed this wild and darkening country. A rocky and timbered hillside towered on the right, with an occasional hardwood arching over the road. On the opposite side the ground fell away to a dense stand of timber and brush.

From somewhere in this vastness came the murmur and gurgle of a mountain brook. Ahead the road dipped and rose and twisted.

A deer appeared, silent as a shadow on the road, watched the stage with lifted head and then, with three plunging leaps, was gone, his white flag disappearing into the brush. Seconds later Steve heard him splashing in the brook.

Baldy let the horses take their time, resting them on the dips. This was the last hard pull. Once over the crest it was downhill or level all the way into Rosebud. If trouble came, Steve reasoned, it would be somewhere before the summit; some place where the coach was weighted down by gravity and the horses could not run.

They came around a bend and up ahead a shaft of dying sunlight fell through a notch in the hills and struck the road and the wild hillside beyond. The horses, knowing the pull was about over, took the remaining upgrade at a faster pace, anxious to have done with it.

Steve leaned back and felt the tightness run out of him. Lon Elliott knocked out his pipe against the heel of his palm and threw the ashes out the window.

Presently sunlight flooded through the stage and Steve knew they had reached the crest.

"My," Ma Elliott said, "I hope that hired girl of mine will have supper—"

Outside a voice shattered the stillness, "Pull up! Pull up!"

Steve shoved his head out the window. A mounted man, with a bandanna over his face, was at the roadside. At that instant there came the flat report of a rifle from the hillside. On top of the coach, Greener gave the explosive, involuntary groan of a man hard hit. On the heels of it came the shattering blast of his shotgun and the man on the horse was driven sideways and back, plunging to earth while his horse bolted.

The coach lurched forward, banging and jolting and there was the sound of a whip and of Baldy's steady and wild cursing. Steve, half out of the window, saw two men ride from behind an elbow of rock. There was a wild racket of sound from their guns, a horse screamed and splinters flew inside the coach. He had his gun up now and he shot three times, taking his time with each shot. Then a bullet smashed into his shoulder, driving him against the door frame. But there were two riderless horses running beside the coach.

He clapped his hand over the raw burning and felt hot blood well against it. The coach swayed and groaned as though it were breaking up as the horses pounded downgrade at breakneck speed, with Baldy yelling up on the high seat. Lon Elliott had clamped a hand on the door and put his arm about his wife.

There was a heavy shock; the coach seemed to hesitate. It swerved violently to the left, hung on two wheels for a timeless moment and Steve swung his arm before the girl beside him. The coach went over with a splintering crash. Laura came down hard upon him. His head slammed against something and the sunlight exploded in a burst of golden lances showering outward to a whole and complete black infinity.

Steve sat on a rock twenty feet from the road with pain a steady bite in his shoulder. He was dazed and shaken. Ten minutes, or twenty minutes, or a half hour ago he had climbed from the wrecked stage, painfully because of his injured shoulder, and unaided because of his pride. His coat was off and the wound bandaged with his ripped and folded shirt sleeve. Laura, or Baldy or someone had done it—he wasn't sure. He had almost gone under again after reaching the rock.

A gray fuzz was over his brain. He knew that near him in the dusk was Lon Elliott, full length on the ground, numb

with the agony of a broken arm. Ma Elliott stood over him, her hands shaking as though they would never stop. From the black bulk of the coach, lying across the road, came a splintering sound. Presently Laura and Baldy came from it, Laura carrying a board ripped from the coach and Baldy a horse blanket.

The girl paused by Steve and peered into his face. "Are you feeling better?"

"I'll do," he said, and they went on to the Elliotts. They used the board as a splint for Lon's arm, binding it in place with strips from his sleeve, and afterwards helped him onto the spread blanket. Ma Elliott sat down beside him and Laura and Baldy moved off a bit and conferred. Presently Laura disappeared into the gloom and Baldy came over to squat beside Steve.

"Your head clear?" he grunted and, when Steve nodded, handed him his gun. "Found it in the road. Greener's gone—don't see how he pulled trigger after he was hit. There's three dead men in the road. You done some nice shootin'."

He tore the end from a cigar with his teeth and lighted it, afterwards looking at Steve in the match's flickering light. "Can't right the stage, an' 'twouldn't do any good if I could. Front wheel's busted. You'll have to stay here while I ride in an' git another 'rig."

Steve explored the gray fuzz inside his head. There was something—something important. "How about the one that shot Greener from the hill? He's still around. And the express box?" He felt proud at having dredged this up from the confusion in his mind.

"I'll hide the box," Baldy said, "but I doubt he's around. He's prob'ly still runnin'." He heaved himself up and went over to where the horses were tethered. Shortly thereafter he rode off down the road. The receding sound of hoofbeats gave Steve a feeling of desolation. A cold wind flowed through the darkening hills

and its chilling touch roughened his skin.

He turned his head and saw the blurred shape of Laura moving before a monstrous white boulder some twenty feet off in a sparse grove of saplings. She crouched and a light flickered and broke into open flames, its tongues licking the rock's face.

He admired the rosy brightness impersonally. In its glare, Laura picked up a fallen sapling and placed it horizontally about waist high. It stayed there, apparently suspended in mid-air. That's a good trick, Steve thought fuzzily, and then a flash of realization hit him and he lurched to his feet and went forward with uncertain stride.

LAURA was piling brush against the horizontal sapling when he reached the grove and he saw that its ends were wedged in the crotches of two that were standing. She swung around to him, her eyes wide. "Steve, your shoulder!"

Her hat was off and her hair tumbled about her shoulders. There was a smudge of dirt on one cheek and somehow she had hiked up the stylish silk dress so that feet and ankles were free.

Steve lurched past her, braced himself on the white boulder and kicked the fire apart.

"Steve!" she protested, and then was silent as he methodically went to work on the burning brands, stamping and grinding them into the earth until no sparks showed.

He leaned back against the rock while wetness spread under the bandage and a fire burned in his shoulder. He said slowly, "There's a fella prowlin' these hills with a rifle. No need to give him light to shoot by."

He heard her sudden intake of breath and thought: Things are rough out here and she might as well see it. If she ever had any doubts about marrying that lawyer chap this will rub them out. And he got a kind of left-handed satisfaction from

the thought's true and complete finality.

"I didn't know," she said in a small voice and was still for a time. Presently she went off towards the coach and returned dragging the boot's canvas covering. "It isn't much," she said, spreading it over the piled brush, "but it will break the wind."

She went up and got the Elliotts and spread the blanket for them before the windbreak. "There's room for you, Steve."

He sat down beside the prone figure of Lon and was grateful for the shelter. Laura again disappeared in the direction of the coach. In the darkness, Ma Elliott bent over her husband. "Lon! Lon! Are you all right?" There was sudden dread in her old voice.

"Good as could be expected," he said and put his hand on her arm.

It was queer, Steve mused. Lon had given her a hard life, toilsome and full of discomforts. And yet, near its end, the thought of his death could chill her with its quick fear. She lay down close to Lon.

High in the gap between ridges stars were putting out their small points of radiance. Many times he had watched these same stars while riding range and having his hopeful thoughts of Laura.

She came out of the denser shadows and stood before him, shapeless in a long coat. "I wish there were something I could do for you," she said in a soft troubled voice. "How is your shoulder?"

"Stiff," he said dully, "and you've done enough already." She hesitated a moment and then sat beside him and, because he had nothing more to say and because her presence sent the old desires hammering through him, he fished out papers and tobacco and laboriously rolled a cigarette. He got it lighted, shielding the flare inside his coat, afterwards cupping its glow in his palm.

The gun barrel was gouging into him and he slid it from his waistband and laid

it on the blanket. He saw Laura watching him. His coat had slipped partly off his bad shoulder. She pulled it up and when she leaned over to button it her hair brushed his face.

Her nearness sent a great rush of feeling through him but he thought she was probably only being kind, like she would to anyone. And because he did not want to trade on that kindness he said, "Thanks," and kept his voice deliberately impersonal.

She straightened up but kept her face turned to him, as though trying to study him through the thin darkness. He took a drag on his cigarette and would not look at her.

Presently she sighed and said, "I think I'll try to get some sleep," and curled up on an end of the blanket.

Steve smoked his cigarette, and afterwards sat cradling his injured arm in his lap and staring at the star's faint shine on the white boulder. In the quiet he could hear the even breathing of the Elliots in sleep. He thought of Laura married to someone else and living in Chicago and now the thought brought no anger or hatred. It was as though the hole in his shoulder had drained off all his rancor.

Discovering this he was surprised and dug down in his mind to find the reason. Slowly it came to him: For the first time he was valuing Laura's happiness more than his own; he was thinking of her and not of himself. He remembered their closeness of last year and thought, she had more sense than he. Her trail was a million miles from his.

He eased himself down on the blanket to try for some sleep, immovably decided on one thing—after his shoulder was fixed he would ride out to the ranch and stay there until Laura had gone.

The moon was pushing up over the ridge when Laura stirred and sat up. Her fingers went at once to her hair. She shivered a little and stood up. "I think

there's another blanket in the coach," she murmured.

He sat up and watched her skirt the boulder and disappear in the dense shadows on the road.

"Steve," Ma Elliott said, "don't drive that girl off."

He swiveled his head in her direction, surprised that she was awake. "Drive her off? She's set to marry that lawyer back in Chicago."

Ma Elliott raised herself on an elbow. "If you had more experience," she said impatiently, "you'd know that when a girl says one thing she sometimes means another. A girl doesn't bring a whole trunkful of clothes just for a three-day stop-over."

He was silent, pondering this. He said in a low tone, "I have nothing—nothing she would want."

The old lady sighed. "When you get to be my age, boy, you'll see that having things doesn't amount to much. It's the getting them that counts. You'll look back and see the fun was in the trying and the doing; being knocked down and getting up again; two people working together to build something. There is nothing on this earth better than that, Steve."

He felt confused and he felt shaken. He reached, without thinking, for his tobacco, and a movement in shadow caught his eye. For a moment he thought it was Laura returning, and then a man stepped out into the silvery light. The moon had broken clear of the ridge and its light fell on the short squat figure and glinted on metal in his hand.

"Stand up! All of you! And don't reach for a gun!" The words were short and sharp as the slap of bullets.

STEVE realized suddenly that he'd been standing back in the trees waiting for the moon to come up. Lon made a movement and Steve murmured, "Careful! He's got a gun on us!" And then he

thought of Laura and deep cold hit his chest and stomach. If she walked into this now the gunman would swing and shoot without knowing or caring it was only a girl behind him.

"Make it fast!" There was a wild, edgy note in the man's voice and he came a step forward.

"Take it easy," Steve said, "we're both smashed up." But he knew now what he had to do and his hand was slipping down to the gun. That man had to be knocked down.

But if he failed, the shooting would warn Laura. His fingers touched the gun's cold metal.

And then something sailed through the moonlight and hit the man in the head. It knocked his hat off and drove him forward. He took two steps to regain his balance and then he came around in a swift turning, half crouched, and for an instant his eyes raked the blackness. But that was all the time Steve needed to bring up his gun and shoot twice. He got to one knee, waiting, but the man fell with a slow, twisting motion, the gun sliding from his hand. He landed face down and lay without movement.

Steve got to his feet as Laura came from behind the rock. She walked over to the man on the ground and stood silently looking down. Then she put both hands over her face and her shoulders shook.

Her sobbing was a very dry, torn sound in the night.

Steve looked down at his smoking gun, feeling the sound twist him up inside. He walked across the little piece of rough ground to her. "Laura." He put a hand on her shoulder. She came around to him, hands still over her face, and put her head against his chest. "It was rough," he said, "but it was him or us, so always remember that."

He felt her shake against him.

"S-Steve," her voice was muffled, "I was afraid he would k-kill you. I just did the only thing I could think of."

He had thought she was weeping for the man on the ground. He told himself, "She is strong—maybe stronger than I am," and he got a glimpse of what a woman would do for her man. And then the meaning of her words came to him with a feeling of wonderment and a pulse started to hammer in his neck.

He put his arm around her and noticed that the shaking stopped. "Steve," she wailed. "I was trying so hard to prove that I was grown up—that I was a young lady. M-Mother says tomboys never get married. And we were both being so quiet and dignified. Things were going fine until we had that fight, and I knew the next minute it was just because you were jealous . . . and now I've ruined it all. I should never have thrown that great, big rock!"

Steve straightened up. He felt full to bursting with goodness. He looked over her head to the Elliots and it was as though he stood on a high hill looking down upon the lives of men. He and Laura were at one end of the road and the Elliots at the other. In between were the rough spots and the smooth, the bad and the good that no man or woman could avoid. A long pull and a rough road but made easier by double harness—by working together.

"Shucks," he said, "that was just a slip. You've grown up for a fact. I judge you'll have to act dignified in town, but out on the ranch if you want to get into a pair of levis and bust loose I reckon I can stand it."

"Oh, Steve," she murmured, and lifted her face.

He bent his head and felt her wet cheek against his own. From far down the road came the dust-raising clatter of Baldy's returning.

By
FRANK P. CASTLE



Dan's bullet slammed Preston against the bar.

COYOTE'S STOOGES

Dan Tyler thought he'd never be closer to death than when he looked down Jim Preston's Colt—until he tangled with a big-time gunnie to save Jim Preston's hide.

RAIN hammered the Box B bunkhouse, a spring rain which meant lush grass in a month but lazing punchers this afternoon. Dan Tyler, foreman, had exhausted inventiveness at setting up barn chores and had allowed the men to knock off for poker and sleep. Now, in his room, he was stamping an intricate pattern into supple leather tapa-

deros. Nearby, a new saddle gleamed on his work bench.

The outside door banged open abruptly and Mary Preston hurried in. Raindrops glimmered in her golden hair and spotted her dress.

"Dan, I'd have knocked, but I saw through the window you were in and a moment's wait would have drenched me. Dad wants to see you right away—"

Then she saw what he was doing, and her mouth rounded in startled surprise.

"I didn't know you could do leather work. How beautiful!" She looked at the saddle. "That's small size—for a girl. A surprise, Dan? For a birthday, maybe?"

He nodded. It must have been evident in his face that it was Mary's birthday he had in mind—he had never been able to hide anything from her—for she crossed the room and put her hand over his.

"Dan," she said gently, "don't waste such a beautiful gift on someone who can't give you anything in return."

He looked down at the blue of her eyes, the soft, smooth curve of her throat, the warmth of her mouth.

"Why, she's given me a lot, Mary—friendship and understanding. . ."

There was a moment of silence. The kind of moment, Dan thought grimly, when a man ought to take a girl in his arms. He wanted to do this. But he could only continue looking at her. Mary swallowed and stepped back, lowering her gaze to the floor.

"Dad's in his office, Dan. It's something urgent. You'd better go."

She left him, moving slowly through the rain back to the big house. Dan swore softly, following her.

The shadow of another man was always between them. An absent one, but as much a barrier as if he were here. Mary's husband.

Old Tod Braddock sat in the swivel chair before his desk. His left leg, stiff

and heavily bandaged, was up on a stool. "Just got some news from town, Dan," he said slowly. "Jim Preston is back. He's at Mike Ogle's deadfall in Loma. And in trouble—"

Tyler groped for a chair and sat down.

A man long gone, Jim Preston. One who had drifted away from the job Dan now held, nearly a year ago—away from Tod Braddock's daughter, his wife. Why he had gone, why he had stayed away, Dan didn't know—unless the man was too loose-footed to stay with the prettiest girl and the most golden opportunity he'd find in a long lifetime. Tod had sent him a number of checks, possibly in reply to occasional letters which always left Mary red-eyed for several days. The last letter, though, was months old. Dan had begun to hope maybe Preston wouldn't ever come back—that maybe there could be a chance for a man who'd never want to wander away from Mary.

"Mary know he's here?" Dan asked.

"No," Braddock said.

"You'd better tell her."

"Not just yet, son."

"He's her husband," Dan said. "She has a right to know. I'll take her to town in the buckboard—"

"Son, he's in trouble—needs cash, a sizable chunk of it. I think that ought to be handled before Mary sees him. And even if I didn't, Jim asked me not to tell her. He said to send someone, since he'd heard I was crippled—" Tod looked angrily at the leg which had been ground against a corral fence by a fractious bronc.

Tyler nodded. "I'll handle it, Tod. I'll take care of whatever's bothering him. Anything else you want to tell me?"

"Only that I'm sorry, boy," Braddock said. "I ain't been blind to you and Mary—ain't been displeased, either. I've often wished she could have waited until you showed up."

"Maybe I am, too," Dan told him. "But she didn't. Jim's her husband. With her

kind, that's all that counts. And no matter how I feel, I think that's how it ought to be."

"'For better, for worse,' eh? I guess you're right. Her marriage vows meant an awful lot to Mary. I sometimes wonder how much value Preston put on them. But she's never said a word to let me know. You can write checks against my Loma account, son. Do what's necessary. And—"

"Yes?" Dan prompted.

"There's different kinds of trouble," Braddock said quietly. "Be careful!"

TYLER heard his name called as he moved again toward the front door. He turned slowly back to the dining room. Mary was setting the table. Three places; she intended to invite him for supper. He ate with the men as a matter of policy, but relished his frequent invitations to the house.

"Blackberry muffins Dan!" she called. "It took the last of my preserves, but I know how much you like them—"

Her voice trailed off. Uncannily acute at reading his face, she already knew something was wrong.

"Not tonight," he said hurriedly. "I'm after my slicker, Mary. A little riding to do."

Then he swore at himself for his blundering tongue. He could have let her think he would be here, borrow another slicker at the bunkhouse, and be half-way to Loma before her suspicion sharpened. She knew that no ordinary business would take him out on a night like this. Dan tried hurriedly to think of a plausible errand to back up his story. But there was no need; she went for his yellow oil-skin and handed it over wordlessly.

There was more he wanted to say, a lot more. But the words wouldn't come. And now it didn't matter; Jim Preston was back. He shrugged helplessly and told her good night.

Saddling in the barn, he rode back through the yard. Mary was still standing where he had left her, apparently lost in thought. Dan lifted his mount to a long lope down the lane leading to the county road.

The main street of Loma was a river of mud. A few scattered lights were dimly visible through the curtain of rain. Dan put his horse in the stable barn at the head of the street. Moving on, he saw Bert Holcomb under a wooden awning in the town's business block. Loma's marshal greeted him with a relieved smile.

"Glad to see you," he said. "Not many good men available tonight, and I may need some help."

"For what?" Tyler asked. "I've got private business, Bert."

"Three riders came in just after dark," Holcomb told him. "I recognized one. Pete Maxie, Dan. Don't know what he might want in Loma, but I'm not taking chances."

Dan grunted. He had heard of Pete Maxie. One of a not very numerous type—a kind growing scarce as the West filled up. He hired his fast guns wherever profit offered, and practiced outlawry, it was said, when gunwork wasn't to be had.

"Is Maxie wanted for anything, Bert?" he asked.

"Don't know," Holcomb admitted. "He's been working up north for years—Montana and Wyoming; those states don't send me many 'Wanted's'—"

"He's probably just riding through. There's nothing here to interest a man like Maxie. Don't count on me, Bert."

The marshal called a protest after him as he went on, leaning into the driving rain. Dan passed through the fan of light laid across the walk from the Pride, the better of Loma's two saloons. Ogle's, the other, was at the foot of the street, a secretive, shuttered place. He let himself

very quietly in through its side door.

A single lamp flickered smokily, back of the bar. Ogle himself was the only one in sight here. He was leaning on the scarred counter, a little, hatchet-faced man who beckoned imperatively. Dan crossed slowly to him.

"Glad to see you," Ogle muttered. "He's edgy as hell about something; I've been afraid he would leave. Tyler, did you bring some cash. A big chunk of it is due me, and I want it."

"Do your collecting from him," Dan said coldly. He looked at a booth in the corner. "Over there?"

Scowling, Ogle nodded. Tyler went across the room. Jim Preston had a gun on the table. His hand flicked up the weapon and centered it on Dan.

There had been subtle changes in the man. He was still handsome, with thin mustache, cleft chin and sleek black hair, but his face had coarsened. Dan looked at the bottles on the table and reminded himself he wasn't here to pass judgment—only to help Mary's husband and get him back with her.

"Tod sent me, Preston," he said.

"Why, it's Tyler," Preston laughed. "Pardon the gun, boy. Maybe I'm overly suspicious, but I got reason to be. Sit down. Have a drink. I was in touch with Loma while I was away—heard how you walked into my job at the Box B—"

"Somebody had to," Dan said.

"How is Mary?" Preston asked, still keeping his gun on Tyler.

"Fine," Dan said woodenly.

"A dutiful woman!" Preston smiled crookedly. "Faithful to her marriage vows; I knew she'd stay put and behave until I got back. I felt like seeing some new country, trying some new ways of making a lot of money fast. I got tired of being a rich man's son-in-law! But I had bad luck. I'm broke. Tod Braddock will fix that quick. Eh? But of course, you know all about it. That's why you're

here. Pay up, Tyler! Spread it on the table for me. I've got to have cash tonight!"

DAN grunted inwardly. There was quivering tension in Preston, despite his easy laughter and smooth words. Ogle had said he was edgy. Dan thought he was afraid of something.

"Tod doesn't keep much money at the ranch," Dan said slowly, trying to guess Preston's thoughts. "I'm afraid you'll have to wait till morning—"

"Like hell! You get his banker up and make him open his safe. I want a thousand dollars tonight, Tyler. I need it for travelling expenses; I'm leaving town again for a while. But I'll be back soon. Damn Braddock and you, too, if you're here to put me off! I could demand a real accounting, you know. All of the Box B will belong to Mary some day—maybe before very long. That means big money—a lot more than any damned thousand."

There was sudden coldness in Dan as these harsh words outlined a possibility grim almost beyond belief. The Box B—stock, buildings, grass—was worth at least a hundred thousand dollars. It would all go to Mary if her father should die. And a man had full control of his wife's property in this state.

Preston leaned forward, a hot, suspicious light flaring in his eyes.

"What are you thinking, Tyler?" he demanded. "What in hell froze you so sudden?"

The man was telling himself he might have said too much, Dan thought, looking down the barrel of Preston's Colt with the feeling he would never be closer to dying.

"Thinking about raising your money," he said quietly. "A thousand dollars, you told me."

Preston obviously debated with himself, finger still tight on the trigger of his weapon. Then he relaxed, nodding.

"In small bills, Tyler," he snapped.

"Make it fast, damn you! I'm in a hurry to get started."

In the man's voice now Dan heard a thin whine of fear, threading his blustering words. Fear of something in Loma, judging by his anxiety to get gone from the town.

Dan did not believe in coincidences. Pete Maxie, gunman and outlaw, was also in Loma tonight.

"I'll get it," he said. "Wait here, Preston."

Ogle was still at the bar when Dan came out. He studied the Box B foreman narrowly, started to speak and decided against it. Dan was glad for fresh air again and the cold splash of rain in his face.

There was taut worry in him now. He moved fast back up the walk, thinking of Tod Braddock, helpless at the ranch, and of Preston's folly. He had to hurry—choke this whole thing off at once and get both Preston and Braddock from under the peril hanging over them.

Either the Pride or the hotel, he thought, looking at the empty street—and it didn't seem likely Maxie and those with him would waste time in a hotel room. He went on to the saloon.

It was as quiet and almost as empty as Ogle's had been. Bert Holcomb stood alone at the rear of the bar. Three men were around a table in front. The one in the middle, with his back against a wall, matched descriptions Dan had heard; he was small and cold-faced, looking no older than Dan himself, but his eyes were older than Dan could ever be. He watched with apparent disinterest as Dan unsnapped his slicker and drew up a chair, but he had dropped a hand below the table and his body had tensed.

"I'm Tyler, foreman of the Box B," Dan said. "I'd like a couple of words with you, Maxie."

"Sure," the little man agreed softly. "What about?"

His two companions Dan swiftly estimated and dismissed. They were run of the brush riders.

"The thing you planned to pull here," he said, "It must have sounded fine, hearing Jim Preston tell about his wife and her father's big ranch—good for a six-figure haul, even at forced sale after its owner's death, and all that money under Preston's control. But you're not going to have a chance at it, Maxie—the chance to get hold of Preston and use him that way. He's going home to his wife, and you and your boys are riding on."

A wild guess, linking the simultaneous presence in Loma of Jim Preston and Pete Maxie. Dan hadn't time to fish for information. He had to throw his suspicion in the gunman's face and hope for something to confirm it.

Maxie smiled faintly.

"You've seen Preston, then," he said. "Glad to learn he's here. And he's talked too much, as usual. Let me set you straight, though, Tyler. Everybody knows I've cleaned out a few banks, here and there. I used Preston on a couple of those jobs, and he messed up every assignment I gave him. That should have warned me to stay with my line of work and not string with him any farther. But he kept talking about how to make a big haul quick if I'd come down here, get rid of his father-in-law and protect him while he was collecting the money his wife would inherit. Preston figured this whole play, not me! And then he got to thinking it was something he could handle himself, without having to share with me. He sneaked away and came hurrying down this way alone."

MAXIE'S unwinking eyes, his quiet voice, told Dan he was telling the truth. And Dan knew his concern for Mary's happiness had made him see this backwards. He knew Preston hadn't wanted to see her here because, with her

uncannily acuteness, she might guess the truth about him. Preston was running away from Maxie, and he had been forced to come to Loma for the money with which to keep running, his only fear that Maxie would catch up with him. He meant to shake off the outlaw, return later and carry through the scheme he had himself proposed.

It was one which could work, and Dan thought it would be tried at once if Maxie reached Preston. And if he didn't, Preston could pick his own time to make the attempt alone, later. No one here knew why Jim Preston had been away from his wife for a year but Mary herself—and a wife couldn't testify against her husband. Preston could claim Braddock had driven him away, that he had come back, that his father-in-law had tried to keep him from rejoining Mary, and that a fatal argument had resulted. Dan didn't think any court in this country could convict a man on such a defense.

"I didn't take a long ride for nothing," the outlaw murmured. "It can still work. And it will."

Dan shook his head.

"No," he said. "You're stopping right here, Maxie."

The little man smiled thinly.

"I'll hand you a high mark for gall, Tyler. But you haven't got enough teeth to back up your bark. Stand up, now, slow and easy. We're all going to walk out of here, you in the middle, away from that tin star down the room, and you're going to take me to Preston. Then we're riding to the Box B while the break this rain is giving us lasts. I'll have to do something about you, of course, along the way."

This came as no surprise. It was obvious Dan's accurate guess had marked him as a man who also had to die. He gave this hasty thought and saw a slim way out. Nodding, he started to rise—then put his weight against the table in an ex-

plosive burst of energy. He drove it into Maxie, slammed the gunman against the wall, and pinned him there. With the same movement, he opened his slicker and whipped out his gun. Maxie himself could not move for a moment, and his men had been taken wholly by surprise. They hastily lifted their hands.

"Holcomb!" Dan called.

The marshal came hurriedly, staring in surprise from the gun in Tyler's hand to the white mask of fury which was Maxie's face.

"I changed my mind about these three," Dan told him grimly. "Lock them up. And reserve a cell for one more. There'll be charges in the morning, soon as I can get out to the ranch and talk to Tod Braddock."

"Eh?" Holcomb said. "Tod's in town! The bartender told me he saw him and Mary ride past in his buckboard a minute ago, heading down the street—"

Dan jerked the marshal's gun from his holster and shoved it into his hand.

"Take over here, Bert!"

He hit the Pride's swinging doors at a run. The rain had eased. Pounding along the walk, he saw the buckboard, empty, in front of Ogle's place. Dan cursed raggedly, thinking of Tod dragging himself on his hurt leg right up to the man who wanted his life. He reached the side door and pushed it open a couple of inches.

Preston was at the bar. Ogle wasn't in sight. But Mary was, just inside the street door, with Tod leaning heavily on her. And Preston, from his rigid attitude, had just seen his wife and her father.

"I guessed you were back, Jim," Mary said unsteadily. "I made Dad admit he sent Dan Tyler to talk to you. I—I could stand your extravagance again, your drinking, your barroom girls. But I'm remembering the untrue things you accused Dan of in your letters—of his taking me from you—and your threats to

"hurt him when you returned. I thought you were just being weak, blaming somebody else for your own failure. Now, if you've harmed him—"

Braddock pushed her aside, face tight with pain from his injured leg.

"This is my chore, daughter," he growled. "If you hadn't kept secret what was in those letters, I'd never have sent Dan. You should have told me a lot of things that you've kept bottled up. But I'll make up for it if it costs me my leg. Preston, you got a settlement long overdue, and I aim to pay it with my fists!"

Preston smiled crookedly. Dan thought there was hurried calculation in the man—recognition of this as an opportunity to be seized, in spite of his fear of Maxie. His gun seemed to flash up from nowhere; it had been close by his hand, on the bar, and it swung down at Tod Braddock as the rancher, eyes widening, fumblingly started to draw. Dan tilted his own weapon and loosed a hurried shot. It turned Preston and slammed him back against the bar.

MARY had screamed, trying to get between her father and Preston. As though this was a signal, the door slatted open behind her, knocking the girl to one side and down on her knees. Gun in hand, Pete Maxie absorbed the scene with a lightning glance, and picked Tyler as his target. Dan tried to beat him to the first shot, but this was a man who made a profession of speed; gunflame poured from his Colt's muzzle in three hammering blasts which seemed like one shot.

This very speed saved Dan's life, perhaps; the first shot hit his right side, mauling him, and the next two went through the open door, over his head. He fired as he fell and Maxie bent, clutching his shirt. Dan realized in astonishment that his one bullet had tagged the gunman.

Lifting himself, Dan saw Preston's weapon lower to cover him. It held there a moment, then swung abruptly toward Maxie. The gunman, face contorted, fired from his hip, and Preston jerked violently, hit high and hard. Dan fumblingly transferred his Colt from right hand to left and slammed another shot which seemed to tear through Maxie's body. The little man pitched limply forward on



his face. He would never be shooting again.

Dan shifted his aim to Preston. But he hesitated. The man was dying on his feet. He was looking at Mary, eyes dull and glazed.

"Never had your love, Mary," he whispered raggedly. "Not the way I wanted it. Couldn't break your pride—couldn't make you beg me to stay, when I rode off. I meant nobody else to have you—had a bullet waiting for Tyler when he brought me that money. But maybe it's better, this way. Doesn't matter—nothing matters—now."

Dan saw him spill. Mary started toward the man who had been her husband, but as Dan struggled to his feet she turned abruptly to offer him her shoulder as support, fingers unsteadily touching the hole under his collarbone made by Maxie's bullet. Dan was vaguely aware

(Please continue on page 130)

By **RICHARD
BRISTER**



As John tried to powder a slug at the man, Ray's gun crashed.

When John Tewkesbury made his younger promise never to lift his gun against a man, he didn't foresee the day his son would have to . . .

DRAW—OR DIE!

JOHAN TEWKESBURY was mighty fond of his wife, Sophie, and down the long years he had fallen into a habit of letting her have her own way. A frail woman, once a great beauty, Sophie was inclined to be just a mite willful. She let him know her mind without any lady-

like quibbling when young Ray requested permission to carry a gun, for his sixteenth birthday.

"John, I won't have it," she said.

"Now, the boy needs a gun, Sophie," John tried to explain. "You've got to understand that a gun is a necessary part

of a ranch worker's equipment. The boy's doing a man's work around here already, and—"

"I understand all I need to," said Sophie. "Gun's are for killing. Ray's too young to be carrying around an invitation to trouble against his leg in a holster. I won't have it."

"But ding blast it—"

"Now just you check-rein that hot temper, John. It was a gun killed Charlie at Shiloh, remember. And almost killed me with the same bullet. I guess I've a right to decide when Ray's ready to handle firearms with discretion."

John had the vague sensation of having been forced into a corner. Sophie could always strip him of his defenses by mentioning Charlie, although he had to admit she was decent enough not to use this weapon except as a last resort. Sophie had always been frail, and when she presented John with a son and heir in the person of Charlie, all those long years ago, they'd decided one boy was all they really needed to carry on the Tewkesbury name and traditions, and Sophie wasn't to risk her life trying to bear any more children.

So when Charlie, at the age of nineteen, had gone gallivanting off to the war, and had got his at Shiloh. And characteristically, Sophie, once she'd got over her heartbreak, had grimly determined to bear John another son to make up for what had happened at Shiloh.

She'd done just that, at the age of forty, and it very nearly had killed her. But now Ray was growing into a fine, strapping young man, and John felt his debt toward Sophie.

"The boy's old for his age," he suggested. "They grow up quicker out here than back in Kentucky. It's a hard life, ranching. Not like the plantation, where the help took all the grit and sweat out of things for us."

"Sixteen is sixteen," Sophie said. "And

I'm well aware life is hard out here, John."

"Well," he said uncomfortably, "I wish we could've stayed back there. I know it hasn't been easy for you."

"Now don't go regretting what's done and finished. I'm not blaming you, John. You've done wonders, picking yourself up from nothing after the war. Lot of other women in my position weren't so lucky as I've been. This new land has been good to us. But there's too much bloodshed out here. And I'm not going to sit back idly and let something dreadful happen to Ray. He's the last of the line, John."

John felt his mouth tighten. As a young boy in Kentucky, his father had drilled it into him that he, as the last male representative of a long and illustrious family, was charged with the responsibility of carrying on the Tewkesbury name. Surprisingly, Sophie had felt the responsibility more strongly than John had. But then she'd always had more time on her hands, as the lady of the old family plantation, to acquaint herself with the Tewkesbury genealogical background.

There'd been several state governors, a cabinet member, two soldier-statesmen and a renowned portrait painter in the Tewkesbury family, and Sophie was not above slyly bragging about John's ancestors. Charlie'd shown some promise of greatness, before Shiloh, and now Sophie pinned high hopes on Ray.

"If anything happened to that boy, John," she said now, "I—I don't think I could bear it. We've had our share of tragedy, in this family. . . . Promise me you won't let him carry a gun. Please, John?"

"All right," John said limply.

He came to regret the decision, some three years later, when young Ray, a full grown man now by this country's standard, was accidentally swept from his horse, while combing the chapparral for stray JT yearlings, and fell heavily onto

a jagged outcropping of large stones.

The boy broke one leg, while at the same time spraining the ankle of the other, and there in the heart of the dense chaparral he lay through all of one bitter-cold night, and the scorching heat of the following morning.

His horse, a disloyal beast not yet fully broken to saddle and bridle, had wandered off aimlessly after Ray's fall, blandly and perhaps malevolently ignoring the whistles and calls of his crippled rider.

When the horse finally straggled back to the ranch, some hours later, it was already dusk. John Tewkesbury ordered his hands to saddle and start searching for Ray, said a few comforting words to Sophie, who was already wringing her thin hands distraughtly, then rode hurriedly to join the search party.

WHEN they found the kid at high noon the next day, he was just barely conscious. John leaped from his horse and held a canteen to the youngster's pale, puffy lips, and swore soulfully through clenched teeth.

"Well, Ray," he said, "how you feeling?"

He knew a father's fierce pride at the thin grin that washed over the gaunt young face.

"Hungry, Dad," Ray mumbled, with no reference to his grotesquely misshapen right leg. He didn't faint until some minutes later, when they hoisted him, as gently as they could, onto a hastily improvised litter between two of the horses.

Doc Blanding rode out from Sand Butte, an hour later, and did a nice, professional job of setting and splinting the leg, after they'd managed to cut Ray's boots off him.

"He'll live," the medico told John, but his seamed face was sober. "Good you found him when you did, though. Another night out there would've done for him, John."

John Tewkesbury had a private conversation with Sophie, in front of a crackling fire that evening. His old face was thin with strain and loss of sleep, and the flickering light from the fire place accentuated the grimness of his expression.

He had a long-barrelled sixshooter in his hand, and he directed Sophie's attention to it.

"From now on, the boy's goin' to wear this," he said.

"Now John, you know my feelings about that. Ray's too young yet. He's reckless and full of his pride, like you were at his age. Same as all the Tewkesburys. Your own father was almost killed in a duel over some silly girl, in his early twenties. I won't have Ray carrying weapons till he's old enough to—"

"He's nineteen goin' on twenty. At eighteen a man's grown in this country. Ray's goin' to wear this gun, Sophie."

"I won't have it. I didn't almost kill myself bearing you another son to take Charlie's place, when I was practically an old woman, to see you pave the way for him to risk killing himself with this silly masculine nonsense, John Tewkesbury."

For once the reference to the past failed to crumble the man's defenses, and Sophie Tewkesbury felt an aching fear in her breast as John looked her in the eye and said, "He's wearing a gun from now on. You always said let's not hark back to what's in the past, and this time I'm not goin' to. The boy would've died out there if we hadn't found him before nightfall. And as it was, we had luck with us. That chaparral's thick as a jungle and longer and wider than sin. If he'd had a gun on his hip, he could've shot it off, at regular intervals, and helped steer us in."

"I know, John, but—"

"A man needs a gun doing ranch work. There's rattlesnakes to be killed, for self-protection. A gun'll help a man turn a stampeding herd. A man workin' with horses owes it to the horse he rides to

have a gun handy, in case the critter busts its leg in a hole and needs the painkiller. Sooner or later, a man on the range is going to have a difference of opinion with some other fella. That's one pattern of life no woman can change, no matter how much it pains her. My son isn't the kind to take any man's back-sass, and I'm proud he isn't. But pride and spirit's no good without ammunition, and from now on that boy's got a right to back up his pride with a weapon."

He paused, winded by the long harangue, watching Sophie. She looked over at him for a long moment, then pulled her shawl up around her thin shoulders, and started to snuffle. She looked helpless, beaten, and the sight twisted at his insides, but for once he refused to walk to her and say the comforting things she expected of him.

"He'll get k-killed, John. I can feel it right down in the marrow. In my bones. He's young and reckless and—"

"Not a bit of it. He's a grown man with a sensible head on his shoulders. He'll get killed quicker without the gun than he will with it. It's no use, Soph, I ain't knuckling under."

She looked up tearfully at him. "He's the last of the line. The last of the Tewkesburys."

"All the more reason he oughta start wearin' a gun, in a country where it's standard equipment, and learn to hold his head up."

Suddenly her shoulders sagged, as if she sensed she could not hope to budge him. She said strangely, "If he gets killed, John, I—I don't think I'll ever completely forgive you."

He winced, but could say nothing.

"Maybe you're right," she said hopefully. "About the rattlesnakes, and the need for it as part of his working equipment. But the fighting—" she shuddered. "Make him promise never to use it for fighting. If he'd do that, I'd rest so much

easier, nights. I'm not strong, John. If you'll just give me that much, I'll be able to make the adjustment."

He took his pipe out of his pocket and knocked the dead ashes into the fireplace to hide the torment that was in him. It would be a hard thing on the boy, a dangerous thing, he could not help feeling, but on the other hand he'd made such great headway with Sophie that he was inclined to concede her something.

"I'll talk to him, Sophie," he told her.

The boy was able to sit up for his breakfast next morning. John took the tray in. The six-shooter looked a bit out of place, hemmed in between a plate of ham and eggs and a coffee cup.

"What's this, Dad?" Ray said, looking at it.

"A new tool for you to learn how to use," John said. "And I'd like you to think of it that way, Ray. As a tool, part of your range riding equipment."

The boy picked it up and his eyes were shining. "Gosh."

"You see the string on that, son?"

"String?" he said. "Where?"

"Your mother near had a fit about this," John said. "You're the last of the Tewkesbury line, and you know her feelings. The string on the gun means you're never to use it for fighting."

Ray's face clouded over. "Shouldn't carry it then, Dad."

"A gun has many uses. Ray, I'm sorry, but you know your mother. You can have the gun, but only if you'll take the string along with it."

The boy sat there against the two pillows and took a long time thinking over the pros and cons of it. "All right," he said finally.

RAY TEWKESBURY was twenty-four years old before the promise thus reluctantly given caused him any inconvenience to speak of. By this time the boy was a seasoned cowhand, and John

was in the process of unobtrusively shifting some of his authority over to him, against the day when Ray would be taking over the ranch completely.

Cow thieves, inactive for several years in this broad valley, had once again started to prey on the herds of John Tewkesbury, and one morning young Jeb Fanton, an up-and-coming ex-cowhand who'd started a spread of his own at the other end of the valley, rode in to the Tewkesbury ranchhouse.

"Rustlers hit me again last night," he reported to John and Ray grimly. "I hear you been losing some cattle."

"We have," Ray admitted, as John stayed in the background.

"Figure it's time we throwed together and got after them fellas," said Fanton. He was a slim, sharp-featured man, no more than thirty, with a skin as dark as tanned leather from his days in the sun.

Ray fidgeted unhappily, and John, put in quickly, "Guess we're not ready to take the law in our own hands, yet, Fanton."

"Why not?"

"Let's say for personal reasons."

"Such as?"

John Tewkesbury bristled. "You're askin' quite some few questions, young fella."

"You're an old man," Fanton said blandly. "I can understand you keepin' a cool head for awhile yet. But what's the matter with Ray and some of your hands ridin' out to help me nail down them rustlers?"

John said, "If you're askin' for help, you ain't askin' it proper. If and when we're ready to ride, we'll let you know, Fanton."

"If and when," Fanton said, slurring the words, and let his eye fall on Ray, who stood tight-mouthed, his cheeks flaming.

"I don't like that tone you're using toward my dad," Ray suddenly gritted at Fanton.

"Well, look who suddenly showed he's got temper," laughed Fanton, and John

Tewkesbury saw Ray's big hands start to clench.

He said, "I think you better ride, Fanton."

"Sure," Fanton said, grinning, and turned his big black down the dusty lane that led away northward from the ranchhouse.

Ray turned on John and said earnestly, "Dad, you got to release me from that promise. Next time I run into that fella, he'll start right in guying at me. There's a limit to what a man ought to have to put up with."

"Now Ray, just you relax. Makin' a mountain out of a molehill. . ."

On a Saturday night the following month, Ray took the fancy rig from the stable, drove up to town, and escorted Miss Floribelle Muir, the pretty daughter of a Sand Butte hardwareman, to the young folks' dance at the Grange Hall.

John and Sophie were asleep when the boy came in, sometime in the wee hours, but John noticed the boy looked mighty peaked the next morning.

"Jeb Fanton," the boy scowled in reply to John's question. "Showed up at the dance with a skinful last night, and kept throwing it up to me that I was afraid to ride out with him after those cow thieves. I told him to button it up before I broke some teeth for him, but he just laughed, as if he knew I wouldn't fight if it came to that. He let his dirty mouth run off in front of the girl, and I had to hit him. I couldn't help it."

John took his pipe out and filled it, considering. "You set on the Muir girl, Ray?" he asked finally.

"Pretty much, Dad," Ray said, flushing.

"Well, I guess you could do a lot worse. She's a pretty young thing, and seems pleasant. Your mother'll need some bringin' around. She figures you're the last of the Tewkesburys, and nobody but one of Robert E. Lee's own daughters'd be good

enough for you. But she'll reconcile to it."

"She won't have to bother," Ray said. "I don't think Floribelle'd have me."

John started. "How's that? Why, dammit all, boy—"

"I haven't finished telling about last night, Dad. After I hit Jeb Fanton last night, he swore at me. Right out there in front of everybody. Called me a—well, you can guess. Told me he'd be waiting outside with a gun, any time I felt ready."

"Did, hey?" John said, stunned, but feeling his gorge rise. "And then what?"

Ray looked straight at him. "Somebody else saw Floribelle Muir home from the dance last night, Dad. She's not talking to me. . . Dad, I want you and Mom to let me out of that promise."

"Ray, I can't do that. Your mother—"

"You've got to."

"It'd kill her, son. She almost died havin' you, to begin with. If anything happened to you it'd kill her, sure, Ray, and on her dyin' bed, she'd tell me she hated me. I've had her plain warning on that score."

"It's not fair," the boy blurted out. "They're all laughing at me in town there."

"It's a burden on you. Your time'll come, though. Your mother and I've pretty near run through our string, Ray."

"What am I supposed to do until then?" Ray said dully.

"You got to look inside yourself for the answer to that, Ray," John said, touching the boy on the shoulder.

DURING the next six months, John and Sophie Tewkesbury noticed a drastic change in twenty-four year old Ray. The boy took to riding away alone at all hours, refusing to say where he went on what errand. He grew morose, uncommunicative. He wouldn't ride up to town, any more, although once he had jumped at any pretext to. Sophie had to

cut his hair for him, and she made a botch of it.

"Hard on the boy," John reasoned to Sophie. "Girl turnin' her pretty back on him, whole town thinkin' him yella."

"Let them think," Sophie said. "We know different. People thought highly of Charlie, and indeed they well might have, but that didn't help him at Shiloh. I didn't bring Ray into the world to see him killed by Jeb Fanton."

"Maybe Ray'd do the killing."

"Fiddlesticks! Ray's never been in a gun fight. Fanton's had several. Ray just hasn't been prepared to defend himself, and—"

"I know," John said, without rancor.

The cattle-thieving continued, the raids spaced at intervals just long enough to make it difficult to forestall the rustlers. Jeb Fanton swore bitterly, on his visits to town, that the rustlers were steadily driving him to the wall, and kept urging fat, lethargic Sheriff Smedley to get up a posse and hunt the brand changers.

Smedley promised action but did nothing.

One afternoon John and Ray were up at the north tip of their JT range, rounding up a few stray calves for branding. One frisky calf managed to elude both their nooses, and led them a long, merry chase across the line into Jeb Fanton's land. They finally hogtied the critter on a high knoll, and were about to drag the calf back to their fire when Ray said shortly, "Look, Dad. Over there. That little cleared space in the scrub at the base of that foothill."

John looked but his eyes were not as good as they'd once been. "What about it?"

"Not natural, somehow. Even at this distance that clear patch inside all that dense growth has a false look to me, somehow. Maybe I'd better ride over that way and have a closer look at it."

"Maybe you'd better not," John said.

"This is Jeb Fanton's range we're trespassing on, Ray."

"We're over here for a good reason. I'm having a look."

"I'll look with you."

What they found, they hardly had expected. The cleared patch within the dense scrub was man made, and a thin trail, wide enough to admit one horse or one cow, single file, led in from the open range to it.

"Nice little holding pen Fanton's got here," John said thoughtfully, and looked at his son. "What'd you s'pose he's been holdin' in it?"

"Our cows," Ray said. "My guess is he's been stealing us blind all these months, Dad, and all that weeping and wailing he's done up in town was just window dressing, to throw us and the sheriff off the real scent. Jeb's no fool. Coming over and asking us to help was plenty slick. Picking that fight with me, up in town, was a neat little touch. The last man you'd expect to be stealing your cattle is the man who picks a fight with you."

"Mmm."

"Maybe we'd better ride into town," Ray said, "and have a little confab with the sheriff."

"I don't think so," John said, and the anger was in him. "We'd wear ourselves out tryin' to budge Smedley out of that swivel chair in his office. We'll ride home, son. And one night soon we'll catch Jeb taking some JT cows, and I reckon then we'll deal with him."

They were still on Jeb Fanton's land when they sighted two riders galloping toward them. Jeb Fanton pulled his big black up in a flurry of dust, his foreman, Al Pierce beside him, and said, "Kinda strayed off your home range, haven't you, fellas?"

John Tewkesbury considered. Fanton's skill with a gun was a factor that now had to be dealt with. Pierce, a gimlet-eyed

little man with a stubble of beard on his surly face, was said to wear a gun scarred by six notches. John Tewkesbury was not a young man, nor a fast one, however courageous he might hope to prove himself in battle.

AND Ray? Well, as Sophie said, Ray simply hadn't been trained to defend himself in a gun fight. Shooting an occasional rattlesnake out on the range hadn't taught him the knack of drawing and shooting a human rattler, whose own gun would be drawn and blazing away at him.

"We been branding some young ones," John said carefully. "Calf gave us a chase over this way, and we naturally followed."

"That so?" Jeb Fanton said, squinting, sitting the big black in an attitude of sharp tension. "Kind of thought you two just might be snooping. Kind of."

"Nothing like it."

"Oh, come off it, Dad," Ray blurted out in a sudden loosing of pent anger. "Tell them, why don't you?"

"Shut up, Ray!" John gritted.

Jeb Fanton had turned to gaze almost idly at Ray. "You interest me, kid. What was it you wanted your daddy to tell us?"

"We found that place over there in the scrub, where you've been caching our cattle," Ray said.

"Your cattle?" Fanton's brows lifted, and there was a hurt something in his black eyes as he looked at Ray. John Tewkesbury tensed, and automatically adjusted himself in the saddle, twisting his body around, in his mind's eye picturing the grab he would make for his gun in another few seconds. An old man's reflexes were no match for a younger's, perhaps, but a draw that was certain, that did not fumble or waste any motion—

"Your cattle?" Fanton repeated. "Why, kid, are me and Piercey to gather from that, you think we been stealin' JT stock?"

"Ray," John murmured, and the boy spoke without looking toward him.

"Yeah, Dad?"

"Forget that promise."

"I asked you a question," Jeb Fanton said softly. John's murmured words, and the boy's quiet rejoinder, had intruded a faintly jarring note into this quiet meeting. Fanton resented that interruption, partly because he had not understood, partly because it had thrown him off his timing. "You claimin' we stole JT cattle?" he suddenly grated.

"Yes!" the boy blurted out, and on the instant, John Tewkesbury hunched his stiff old torso forward in saddle, using the swift motion of his upper body as a lever to drive his right arm back, to speed his hand in its path to the holstered gun at his hip.

He brought the gun up, fanning the hammer as he held his seat on the startled horse with knee pressure, and felt a bludgeon strike him full in the chest, driving him down off the bucking horse. He hit hard on one shoulder, fighting the hot, nauseating pain left in the wake of the slug that had pierced him, and quickly brought his gun sight up to train on Jeb Fanton.

He triggered in vain. A slug already had ripped its way through Fanton's jaw bone, knocking the man aside like a dead branch caught in a wind flurry.

"Good boy, Ray," he thought with fierce pride, and turned to get Pierce. He of the stubby beard, the gimlet eyes and the ominous gun reputation.

But Pierce was also unhorsed, his left shoulder bleeding profusely, and even as John tried to powder a slug at the man, Ray's gun crashed, and a small round hole appeared in the foreman's sun-bitten forehead.

John Tewkesbury put his gun into its holster with a hand that was weak and trembling. He looked up at his son, and

said, "Ray, if I die from this one Fanton got into me, I swear I'll die happy. Who says you can't defend yourself in a gun fight?"

Ray knelt to inspect the bullet hole that had knocked John to the dirt. "Don't try to talk, Dad. Hey," he said, his fingers swiftly exploring, "this isn't so bad. Caught you quartering, kind of. You didn't give him too good a target, twisting around that way in the saddle."

John smiled painfully. "You managed to see a lot without looking my way. Son, start explainin'."

But the boy didn't talk until John had been fetched safely back to the ranch-house, and his wound was treated and bandaged. "I used to ride out alone, Dad, after that set-to with Fanton. You mentioned that you and Mom would be passing on, some day, and I'd never given any real thought to the matter. But I figured some day I'd be let loose from that promise, and there was always a chance I'd be forced to fight, to save my own life, promise or no promise. So when I rode out alone, I practiced drawing from the holster and shooting. When you said the word, I was ready. That's about all there is to it."

John lay back and it didn't hurt so much where the bullet tore through him. He was full of his father's pride in the boy, and even Sophie responded to the mood that was in him.

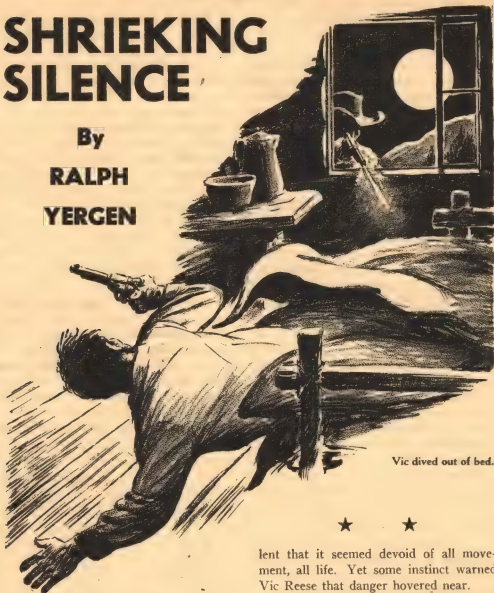
"He's a fine boy, John. You did the right thing, and I'm not going to worry about him any more. Not that one. But there's one thing. That Muir girl. He'll probably go mooning after her again now, and she shouldn't have him. She didn't stand by Ray, when he needed help, and—she's just not good enough for him, John Tewkesbury."

"I wouldn't worry on that account," John Tewkesbury said proudly. "Water seeks its own level."

When the Copperhead band struck prospector Vic Reese, his only warning
was . . .

SHRIEKING SILENCE

By
**RALPH
YERGEN**



Vic dived out of bed.

★ ★

COLD alarm jarred all traces of sleep from Vic Reese. Moon rays slanting through two open windows diluted the cabin darkness. Vic lay motionless beneath the blankets, alert, listening.

The wilderness night was silent—so si-

★ ★

lent that it seemed devoid of all movement, all life. Yet some instinct warned Vic Reese that danger hovered near.

The puzzle expanded in Vic's mind. What had awakened him? He was certain there had been no sound. He did not recall dreaming. Although he was a light sleeper, he rarely awakened before dawn.

Abruptly, the reason flashed into his thoughts. Every night for the past two months, frogs in the pool behind the cabin

had filled the air with a gay refrain from dusk to dawn. Something had frightened those frogs. The sudden silence had broken Vic's slumber.

He slid from the bunk and reached for a sleek-barreled sixgun on the table. Weapon in hand, he crouched in the dark-est corner beside a pack sack and waited.

Current tales of lone miners murdered and robbed here in this vast expanse of southern Oregon wilderness known as the Applejack country traveled through Vic's mind. The way in which the brigands struck and vanished was remindful of reptiles, and this mysterious band had become known as the Copperheads.

Vic had never been molested since he built this cabin here on Bluerock Creek the previous summer. The stream pockets held fairly rich pay-rock, although it required hard work to segregate it. The long trek to town kept his visits infrequent, and he was forced to cache his gold for lengthy periods.

Muted by distance, the squall of a wild-cat disturbed the night's hush. But no sound came from near at hand. The frog pond behind the cabin had been formed by freshet water trapped in a shallow bowl when Bluerock Creek subsided after a spring rampage. As high gulch walls blocked two sides, anyone approaching the cabin from the upstream end would have to skirt the pond's edge.

The cabin doorway faced downstream, away from the frog pool. One window notched the wall logs beside the door. The other window overlooked the stream from a side wall. As Vic preferred fresh air these mild spring nights, both sashes were opened wide, allowing the late moonlight to spill into the room.

Sly, silent movement pulled Vic's gaze to the side window. Moonlight glinted on tubular steel. Abruptly, a dark shape filled the opening. The pistol hammer under Vic's thumb flattened. His voice jabbed the silence like a bayonet.

"Freeze, hombre!"

The shape at the window dropped from sight at the instant Vic's thumb flicked off the hammer. The weapon bellowed, bucked hard against his palm.

"Too late. Missed," Vic snapped.

He plunged to the door, flung it wide and stared into the night shadows. Sounds of pounding boots came from behind the cabin. Vic darted around the building, and the dark surface of the pool swung into view, stretching from the root of the grassy hump which supported the cabin.

A human shape was legging it along the trail that rimmed the pond on the side next to the gulch wall. Vic also spotted a man on the opposite side of the pond lunging into the willows that masked the creek waters.

Vic slammed a shot at the man just as the willows swallowed him. He heard boots splash in the stream.

Whipping his gun toward the other man, he drove fresh reports into the thundering echoes. The fleeing bandit put on an extra spurt and soon melted into the deep shadow of the gulch wall. The next minute, Vic heard horses galloping up the creek trail.

When the sounds of retreat had faded, Vic Reese reloaded his gun and returned to his bunk.

"Copperheads," he muttered to himself. "Don't think I hit any. But must have scared the gizzard out of 'em. Reckon they won't risk it again soon. Those frogs saved my hide."

Five minutes later, the first frog croaked a baritone note. Others joined in the overture. Soon the night was filled with its weird chant.

Vic Reese smiled and pulled the blankets about his shoulders. Easily he drifted into untroubled sleep . . .

THE new day dawned clear and blue. The fragrance of dew on growing things was fresh in Vic's nostrils when

he built a cooking fire. After breakfast, he baked four extra flapjacks. These he carried outside.

Near the creek a sizable structure built of poultry netting housed four furry animals with long ring-tails and black bands across the eyes.

The raccoons saw Vic approaching and began a mad scramble against the wire netting. Vic opened a small gate and stepped inside. As he held the pancakes high above his head, the furry pets climbed all over him, almost smothering him with their bushy tails.

"I give up. You can have 'em," Vic said, laughing. "Here's yours, George. And a cake apiece for Tom and Pat and Betsy."

Vic had found the raccoons when they were small kittens. Being interested in the early days of the American republic, he had named them after notable figures in the struggle for independence: George Washington, Tom Jefferson, Pat Henry and Betsy Ross. They provided him with much-needed company.

Vic Reese was working Bluerock Creek a mile upstream. All day he slaved in the waters, pausing only to eat a sandwich. The setting sun was tinting the ridges with crimson when he funneled the day's take of gold into his poke and headed homeward.

The frog pond, the raccoon pen and the cabin were draped in gulch shadows when Vic Reese reached them. As he cooked supper, the frogs began to tune up for their all-night cantata.

Vic had finished eating when a horseman dismounted in front of the cabin. A wide, bushy, swart man who actually resembled a blacksmith more than a prospector.

Vic surveyed the man, his eyes cool and neutral. Baz Gowry lived with his two brothers on Fantail Creek, over the ridge to the west. "Howdy, Baz," Vic said.

Baz Gowry nodded and fished for a hunk of tobacco. "Hullo, Reese."

"Fine evening," Vic remarked.

"What's fine about it?" Baz Gowry growled. "My back's busted from panin' the crick all day. Hell of a way to make a livin'."

"There's worse," Vic observed. "Honest, anyhow."

"Gittin' plumb dangerous, though. About the time a man gits enough dust raked together for a new grubstake them consarned Copperheads comes along on a dark night and butchers him. Heard they made a sieve out of some old geezer over on Gooseneck Creek last week. Ain't you scairt to stay here plumb alone, Reese?"

The events of the night paraded through Vic's mind, but he decided not to mention them. In this Applejack country a man usually lived longer if he didn't talk much. "Can't say I'm afraid, Baz."

Baz Gowry gnawed heartily on his cold-pressed. "You ort to be. Nobody knows who they're gonna scorch next. Me and Si and Tarweed figgered it'd be a good idee if you rode over to our place nights. Tain't fur and we got room. Them Copperheads wouldn't dast tackle four men at once. They just pick off the singles—like you."

Vic Reese drew a thoughtful breath. Close association with the Gowry brothers did not appeal to him. "Thanks, Baz. But I reckon not. I'm kind of attached to this place. Anyhow, it's not likely those Copperheads will waste their time on small fry like me."

Baz Gowry grunted and scratched his bulging stomach. "It's your own neck, Reese. But I don't see how the hell anybody could sleep with that devil's own frog-croakin' racket right outside the window."

Vic Reese grinned, listening the the chorus as it swelled in volume with the deepening dusk. "That helps. Likely I couldn't sleep at all over at your cabin."

Gowry grunted again.

"I have to feed my 'coons, Baz. Come along and watch?"

Vic went into the cabin and selected four sourdough biscuits and a handful of dried peaches. Baz Gowry joined him as he approached the cage where the four clean little animals watched through the netting with eager eyes.

As Vic opened the gate, he noted that Pat Henry was standing on his hind legs, his face pressed against the fence in front of Baz Gowry. Vic bent over to lay the food on the grass. Suddenly, Pat squealed in pain. He recoiled from the fence and rolled on the ground, clutching his nose with his forepaws and whimpering.

A quick sweep of anger roared through Vic Reese. He let the gate swing shut and turned toward Baz Gowry, controlling his voice with a strong effort.

"You kicked that 'coon?"

Baz Gowry spat a thick brown stream and looked the other way. "The dirty devil actually tried to bite me through the fence."

Vic knew Gowry was lying. Pat Henry was the friendliest raccoon of the four. Gowry's cruel, dominant nature had prompted that kick. He was the type of strong man who took delight in cuffing around the weak.

VIC fought a bitter battle with his aroused anger. All of his emotions shouted at him to smash the cruelty and conceit out of Baz Gowry. But cool reasoning told him he should not make enemies of his nearest human neighbors. He managed to keep his voice cool.

"You knew the 'coon couldn't hurt you. But you hurt him."

Baz Gowry grunted. "It's gittin' dark. I'll be moseyin' along, Reese. Drop in on us sometime. We got no consarned bitin' 'coons. But we allus got a bottle of rye around."

With relief, Vic watched the prospector mount and ride away.

Vic rolled in early, glad to relax from the long day's toil. He slipped a loaded sixgun beneath his pillow. He didn't expect the Copperheads back, but no one could be sure.

With the song of the frogs as a lullaby, he promptly winged away as if on a magic carpet. Sleep would not have come to him as easily if he had known the workings of Baz Gowry's mind as the beefy prospector dismounted on Fantail Creek.

Baz Gowry was a man who vastly preferred to profit from the labors of others. As he entered the cabin on Fantail Creek, Si and Tarweed, were playing pitch.

"I been visitin'," Baz announced. "I found out why our deal blew up last night."

Si Gowry's inky eyes glittered in the lamp light. "Hell you did! Reese tell you?"

"Naw. He don't say much. He wouldn't fall for our plan of scarin' him into sleepin' over here where we could handle him easy. He don't know it, but I figgered out how come he was awake when Tarweed tried to smoke him last night."

Tarweed's whiskey-bloated face twisted into an impatient scowl. "Spit it out, Baz."

"When you two yahoos hoofed it past that there puddle, all the frogs in it shut up like clams. When the frogs quit croakin', Reese woke up and smelt a rat."

"Don't call me no rat!" Tarweed snarled.

"Shut up, Tarweed," Si snapped. "I see it. Them frogs are his watchdogs—only they bark backjackwards."

Baz nodded. "Reese ain't been to town for a long spell. He must have a passel of pokes cached somewhere around his shack. Tonight we make another try. Only this time we sneaks up from the downstream side to the front of his shack. That way the frogs won't hear us. They'll

go right on bellerin' their fool heads off while Reese sleeps."

"Then we salt him for keeps," Si injected.

Baz nodded. "You'll take the front winder, Si. Tarweed can handle the side winder. You can pump Reese full of lead two ways."

"What winder you be at?" Tarweed wanted to know.

"There's only two winders, Tarweed. But I'll be coverin' the door."

"Yeah, I figgered that. Reese can't shoot through a closed door," Tarweed said sarcastically. "You always figger a safe place for your own hide. Like stay-in' with the hosses last night. How about you stickin' your fat neck out once?"

"Shut up, Tarweed," Si snapped. "Baz is a reg'lar houn' dawg at smellin' out caches. But you're better with a shootin' iron. Anyhow what danger is it beefin' a hombre when he's sound asleep?"

"Aw right. Only this time Baz is gonna plan hisself out there in front of that door where he can nail Reese in case he busts outside. If he hides way back behind some rock, I'm kickin' his pants."

Like a silver saucer, the moon hung low in the west when the Gowry brothers rode up the Bluerock trail. Snag-toothed gulch walls flung grotesque shadows across the drowsy stream. From ahead the rhythmic chorus of many voices fluted through the night.

Baz Gowry grinned. The melody of the frogs was sweet music to him. He spurred alongside Si.

"Listen to them croakers."

Si nodded. "Must be a million of 'em in that puddle."

"They're makin' our job safe tonight."

"Sounds skookum. Where do we leave the hosses?"

"Around the next bend."

After the horses were tethered in a clump of myrtle, the Gowry brothers proceeded on foot with Baz boldly in the lead.

They rounded a jutting rock, and the Reese cabin bulked on the grassy shoulder a hundred yards ahead. Moonlight tinsel-seled the clearing and spilled on the log walls. The raccoon pen was wrapped in shadow. The pond nestled well out of sight beyond the jump which supported the cabin, but the frog cantata was in full swing.

Baz Gowry slapped his brothers on the back. "March right up to them winders and blaze away," he whispered.

"Don't fergit you're marchin' up with us," Tarweed reminded. "Or did you figger you'd sneak back to nurse the hosses?"

Stung by the insults, Baz continued with his brothers until he was within a few yards of the door. Si moved on to crouch beneath the front window. Tarweed skulked to the corner. He hesitated, looking back for a sign from Baz.

THE frogs sang merrily on. Baz waved Tarweed forward. Hardly had he completed the movement when the voices from the pond trailed off. One lone baritone croak seemed to signal the end of the concert. Suddenly the night became as quiet as a snow-bound cemetery.

Alarmed, both Si and Tarweed sent questioning glances at toward Baz.

Puzzled, Baz hesitated. He was a sitting duck in the bright moonlight if Vic Reese threw open the door. Panic touched him, and he waved them on.

"Nail him—quick!" he hissed.

Sixguns glistening, Si and Tarweed sprang to the windows.

Inside the cabin, Vic Reese came to his senses swiftly, aware of the deep, unreal silence. His hand probed beneath the pillow, closed on the sixgun handle. Every nerve grew vigilant.

The moon glow streaming through the windows suddenly blotted out. Vic dived out of bed, hit the floor rolling and crashed into a pole bench.

Two spitting jets of powderflame con-

verged on the bunk. Bullets ripped the blankets. Choking smoke boiled through the room. Gun thunder made the log walls quiver.

Propped on one elbow, Vic threw down on the dark shape blocking the front window. As he fired, the sound of lead smashing into a body undertoned the gun's roar. Suddenly the window was clear and moonlight poured into the room.

The man at the side window spotted Vic. A red jab of fire punched the room. The bullet crackled past Vic's ear and plowed into a wall log.

Vic flattened on the floor. Smoke smarted his eyes. Again he fired, snap-down fashion. The man at the window yelped a curse and blazed back at him.

Vic cracked another cap, and the man's curse drew into a wailing sigh. Vic watched him stagger back, loll sideways and drop abruptly.

Leaping to his feet, Vic yanked the door open and peered into the night, his gun ready. The first man he had shot was piled in a motionless heap. Then he spotted another man heeling it across the moon-frosted clearing toward the nearest cover.

"Hold it!" he yelled.

The running man looked back over his shoulder and began to shoot. Wild bullets buzzed through the night, slammed into the cabin walls. Vic hugged the door casing, shooting with cold precision. He counted six powder flares from the fleeing raider and knew his enemy's gun was empty.

Vic missed two shots. As the hammer dropped on the last shell in the chamber, the man in the clearing plunged headlong as if tripped by an invisible wire.

Echoes faded. A deep silence cloaked the gulch. Spotting no further movement, Vic went outside and rolled over the first man he had shot. The moonlight spilled brightly on Si Gowry's face.

"Stone dead," Vic muttered.

Tarweed Gowry proved to be in an equal state. But Baz was only wounded in the leg.

"Help me, Reese," he whined. "His empty gun lay only a few inches from his fingertips, but all his fight had dissolved. "Them consarned brothers of mine forced me into going through this deal, Reese. I—"

"So you three hombres are the Copperheads," Vic said. "I ought to finish you right where you lay. But I'll bandage your leg and haul you right to the sheriff, Baz."

Relieved, Baz said, "I can't figger out why them damned frogs quit croakin' all of a sudden."

"Got me stumped, too."

Wondering, Vic walked around the cabin to where he could view the pond. Happily wading in the shallow edges were four familiar creatures: Tom Jefferson, Pat Henry, George Washington and Betsy Ross.

Vic grinned, recalling events of the previous evening. When he returned to bandage Baz Gowry's leg, he was still grinning.

"The frogs weren't scared by any human critturs. But you were the cause of them warning me just the same, Baz Gowry."

"How come?"

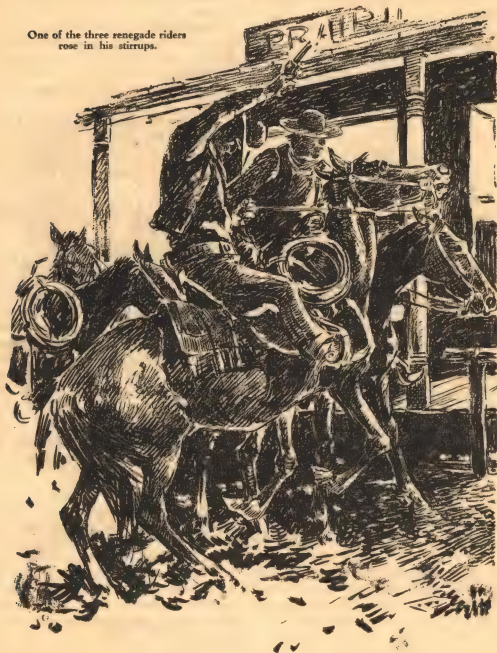
"When you kicked that 'coon last night, it made me so mad I forgot to latch the gate. Sometime in the night they pulled it open and walked out. Apparently they got around to fishing for those fat juicy frogs in the pond about the time you three Copperheads sneaked up on me. Scared by the 'coons, the frogs signed off in a hurry and hit for deep water."

Baz Gowry groaned. "Imagine being licked by four 'coons and a batch of croakin' frogs?"

Vic grinned again.

TOWN-TAMER LAW

One of the three renegade riders
rose in his stirrups.



Smashing Novelette of Boomtown Havoc

Alone between the enraged Vigilantes and a killer's reckless crew stood Shanghai Hickson, frontier law-dog—stretching his fabulous luck to the breaking point in a fight that wasn't even his own!

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By **HARRY F.
OLMSTED**

CHAPTER

Lawman's Duel

1

Shanghai Hickson couldn't have told what fool's errand drew him northward, ever northward, from the mushroom towns he had tamed along the

brawling Chisholm Trail. Perhaps it was that westerling rails, dirt farmers and the inevitable barb wire were dooming the drives, or perhaps the vast discontent that conquered territory brings to a man whose life revolves about conflict. Hell towns on the Powder River were flaunting their lawless challenges. The wolf cry of a gold-lusting horde was lifting from Deadwood City and the Black Hills. And the cold-visaged Town-Tamer with the icy gray eyes and the blonde curls brushing his wide shoulders was riding now across Troublesome Fork into Brule Crossing.

Outwardly, the town was an old story to this grim gun marshal. There was same dusty street, shot with chuck holes. The same glaring lines of unpainted false fronts; the same worn boardwalks, undulating like the prairie that pressed in upon Brule Crossing. Yet underneath the sordid meanness of this scattering of saloons, gaming dives and board shacks that passed for homes, there was a difference. Realization of it stirred Shanghai Hickson, lit strange lights in his restless roving eyes.

Though he was strong, wilful and sufficient, the Town-Tamer never questioned those promptings that came from his direct-action brain. He didn't now. He had not intended stopping in Brule Crossing, but all at once and for no reason that he could plumb, he was reining into a feed barn and dismounting with the stiffness of many prairie miles.

A few minutes later, striding from the stable, his shoulders swayed arrogantly, and a faint smile touched his wide lips that the townsmen should pause to stare at him. For a brief moment, his eyes played along the false fronts, coming at length to rest upon a sign identifying the Prairie Queen Saloon.

Heading toward it, he murmured. "Nice little town. Prosperous an' busy! But there's a canker eating into it."

His strange, restless eyes took in the stares of the townfolk. He sensed that they were looking at the two big guns slapping his tapered thighs and he took note of the fact that no one in sight was armed. That fact suggested peace and trust and common understanding. Shanghai smiled, pulled at his towney mustache. Then he was shouldering through the louvered door of the Prairie Queen.

The place was thinly patronized at this hour. And before Shanghai reached the bar he had scanned all of the patrons, cataloguing them in his orderly brain. As he awaited the bartender, his eyes played with a boldly-lettered sign over the back-bar:

KEEP THE LAW!
CHECK YOUR GUNS!

The smiling bartender was rubbing his hands. "Check your weapons, neighbor?"

Shanghai snorted. "Not while I'm sober," he murmured, and gave his order.

The man served him, a queer look in his eyes. "Ridin' right through, eh?" he asked. "That's your loss. We got a nice little town here. If your line's cattle, we're gettin' a play from all the Montana-bound herds—an' a new deal under the law."

"How's that?"

"Sheriff Thomas, the late lamented, was a strict believer in gun law, stranger. But he proved a mite slow when he came up against Lank Endershot. After the funeral, folks taken the advice of my boss—Galt Gabralt—and appointed a man who goes in for fair dealin'. Live an' let live, as the feller said. It's understood now that folks check their guns and do their business with smoke. A great idea!"

"Has it worked?" countered the Town Tamer, drily.

The bartender shrugged. "We only buried Thomas last week. But it'll work, all right. Sheriff Toles Latimer is young

—only a kid really—but he's got the right idea, and the whole town is behind him. That's why I suggested checking yours."

"Interesting, murmured Shanghai, draining his glass. "And thanks."

Like some great, tawny cat, he strode outside to stare into the sunset. A murmur ran up and down the street. A man rose from a chair on a saloon porch, worried off a bait plug, spoke softly to a nearby friend and ducked inside. These and other evidences of their interest in him touched Shanghai with quiet humor.

He chuckled mirthlessly and moved toward a restaurant that spread its enticing odors to the breeze. Business had not yet risen to full tide, so it remained for Hippy Gilligan, the wizened proprietor with the snappy black eyes and dry humor, to personally serve Shanghai.

HIPPY GILLIGAN had seen many men come and go. He knew them as only a restaurant man can—their tastes, their greeds, their manners, their strength and weakness. And he was weighing Shanghai Hickson, noting the expensive black broadcloth, white shirt and flowing tie. Noting, with even more interest, the leonine head with its aura of tawny hair, worn long after the frontier fashion; the grim, almost sullen lips and the strange lights in those pale blue eyes. Here, he decided, was a hard man to get along with, a stern man who demanded his way, dangerous but not bad.

"I've a stove-top prime for fryin', Colonel," he murmured. "An' a loin-cut that thick waitin' to slap on it. Satisfactory?"

"Quite," answered the Town-Tamer, without looking up. Make it rare, and who is the lovely young lady in yonder booth?"

Hippy Gilligan lowered his voice. "A Miss Edith Greer," he confided, "of Kansas City. She's with our new sher-

iff—Toles Latimer. It means a splicin' job for the first circuit-rider passin' through." His lips pursed pensively, "—providin' Toles lasts that long. He's in on a wave of reform. No guns, no cheatin' at the poker tables. No nothin' but the brotherhood of man. Nutty idea, if yuh ask me."

"I didn't ask you," murmured Shanghai. "But Latimer should be safe enough without a gun on."

"My friend," chided Hippy. "You're a judge of fine steak and pretty wimmen, but it's plain you don't know Lank Ender-shot!"

Whereupon he turned on his heel and went back into the kitchen. Shanghai's eyes showed no humor as he turned his glance back to the girl—a lovely, olive-skinned little thing with the marks of breeding plainly evident in her bearing. She was chattering and smiling vivaciously, blushing now and then at some soft sally from the lawman whom Shanghai couldn't see. But her dark eyes, where any real joy should have been mirrored, were bleak and clouded. And the Town-Tamer knew that deep inside her lurked an overshadowing fear.

When he had eaten, Shanghai paid the charge, selected a cigar from the case, bit off the end and inhaled deeply as he applied the match. Then he had turned his eyes to the man who squired Edith Greer.

Toles Latimer was tall, taller and lighter than Shanghai Hickson, with a swift turbulence of spirit that is difficult to control. The stare he bent upon Shanghai was vibrant, quizzical, challenging. And the difference between the two lawmen was like that between a plunging, rock-tortured cataract and the deep, chill water behind a dam.

Hitching up his guns, Shanghai moved to the street. He took a position with his back to an awning post, to enjoy his smoke and the tempering cool of evening.

He stood thus when Toles Latimer and Edith Greer came out. The sheriff's eyes kept studiously away from Shanghai's person. But the girl looked straight at the Town-Tamer—and with an unmistakably frightened appeal.

Together they moved along the walk, pausing to argue briefly, quietly, some three rods away. Now Toles Latimer was tipping his hat, coming back. His eyes were fixed sternly on Shanghai.

"Can't you read, sir?" he asked, with just a shade of rancor.

"I manage," grinned Shanghai.

"Then check your guns!" ordered the youngster. "We make no exceptions to that rule. Even I do not carry a weapon. Check your guns or I'll have to take you in."

Shanghai's smile faded. His chill blue eyes lanced the sheriff with an abrupt interest. "I can't let you arrest me, Sheriff Latimer," he said, softly. "And neither can I chance emptying my holsters. I could ride on, of course, but I prefer to rest myself and horse before continuing my journey."

Latimer flushed. "You'll have to make up your mind," he snapped ungraciously. "The law is the law. Every man must obey it or it becomes unenforceable. Ride out of town, check your weapons or go to jail. Which is it?"

Shanghai smiled. "Why make it hard on yourself, Sheriff? Why not do as I used to do for visiting lawmen? Make 'em honorary deputies during the course of their stay—just a mark of courtesy?"

Latimer's air of searching was real and heavy. "You have the best of me, Mister—?"

"Hickson!" the Town-Tamer filled in. "William Hickson!"

"Hickson?" The sheriff started; his eyes widened. "Shanghai Hickson of Abilene and Hays! I've seen your picture." Slow red crept up to his temples. "We might as well get this straight,

Hickson. I'm not glad to see you, so I won't say it. In Brule Crossing, we lean to the belief that half the killings, half the lawlessness is due to over-officious swaggering lawmen setting a bad example for others. . . ."

"That's as may be," smiled Shanghai, patiently. "Right now I'm only a citizen. Protecting myself from mebbe a dozen gunswift gents who want the glory of killin' me. My life wouldn't be worth that"—he snapped his fingers—"were I to shed my guns. It's no go Latimer. Either make me a deputy or—or turn your back when you see me on the street."

For a long minute, the young lawman studied. "I can't overlook you," he said slowly, "'cause everybody in town will be pointing you out. Determined as you are, there'd be blood spilled if I insisted upon bringin' you in." A wan smile twisted his boyish face. "It looks like you've got me over a barrel, Hickson. Come down to the office and I'll make you a temporary deputy." He held out his hand.

Shanghai's palm brushed it, withdrawing quickly. Then the two were matching strides down the boardwalk.

CHAPTER

2

Shanghai Checks Bet

An uneasy undercurrent in Brule Crossing was vividly apparent when the Town-Tamer stepped into the street from the hotel the following morning! Men stepped off the walk in fear or opening distaste to let him go by.

His hunger appeased, Shanghai stood for several minutes on the walk outside the restaurant—six feet of straight frame carrying two hundred pounds of hard, slab-like muscles.

At length he moved slowly across the street to enter the Prairie Saloon. A swamper toiled industriously under the eyes of the bartender and another one who lolled indolently along the long counter.

This one commanded a second look from any man.

Galt Gabralt was neither short nor tall, his spare body was in perfect proportion. Strength slept in his small but wiry muscles. Speed showed in every line of him. His dark handsome face was marked by even features, an ebony mustache and pit-black eyes that held a perpetual chill. Gabralt was a tough customer, with a reputation of his own. Yet he started when his glance fell upon the commanding figure of the Town-Tamer.

Shanghai's eyes were on the nicely groomed saloonman. They remained upon him after he too had draped an elbow over the bar. In that challenging duel neither man flinched.

Shanghai Hickson's words were edged with contempt: "Abilene always wondered about the strange end of Pierre Gaultier," he said, measuring his syllables, "when his bullet-riddled horse, his hat and gun and personal papers were found on the prairie beside his charred skeleton. That find excited an entire town, my friend."

Gabralt's eyes lit with slow-burning fires, but his poker face was in repose and his fingers drummed a swift tattoo on the bar, as he returned with equal softness; "Towns are very easily excited, Hickson. Take Brule Crossing, for instance. Even now the citizens here are sweating themselves into a lather speculating upon why a notorious gun-marshal—one of the deadliest killers in the West—chooses to honor them with his protection."

"There," smiled the Town-Tamer, "Brule Crossing has the advantage of Abilene. It's simple enough for any citizen to ask this 'notorious gun-marshal' why he interests himself here. But in Abilene, we were unable to question the remains that they buried as Pierr Gaultier. Whose body was that, Pierre?"

"The name is Galt Gabralt," said the saloonman, crisply.

Shanghai's shoulders moved irritably. "My mistake, Mister Gabralt."

Gabralt peered at him, his black eyes filled with dancing flames. "One mistake is excusable, Hickson. Two . . . well, two can become dangerous. Don't play upon false ideas in this town. And don't get the idea that because you talked a green kid into making you a temporary lawman here you can go on wearing guns in Brule Crossing."

Shanghai smiled thinly. Then said idly: "Toles Latimer is your man, eh, Gabralt?"

"All the officials here are my men," said Gabralt. "Don't ever doubt it."

"What have you against the boy?" Shanghai asked in a strange voice. "You want to disarm him and then throw him to the wolves. Why?"

Gabralt's face darkened. He chose to disregard the question. "There's no place for you here," he said. "We've tried your kind and it didn't work. Marshal Zeb Thomas was buried last week. Like you, he leaned to guns and to interference with the lawful trade of an open town. It wouldn't work."

"Hickson, your gun-reputation damns you. Toles Latimer will have to do a lot of explaining why he pinned a badge on a man of your stamp. You can help him by riding on. Not to mention helping yourself."

Shanghai Hickson's lean hands went out to cover the twin bulges beneath his broadcloth coat. "I think we understand each other, Gabralt," he said wearily. "So I'll be bidding you good morning."

He strode to the door and out.

In the bright sunshine he paused to light a cigar and to whip the town with an appraising glance. Plainly he could feel the impact of unfriendly hidden eyes. Then his attention was concentrated on the bright parasol of a young woman coming along the walk. Beside her was Toles Latimer, young sheriff of Brule Crossing. Shanghai admired the graceful sway of

her lithe body, smiled a little at the proud bearing of her squire. It touched him with memories of a younger, gayer Shanghai Hickson and another girl. Those memories he had thought dead, and there came across his normally chill face a wistful air of respect.

SHANGHAI took his way toward them. He knew that he was a man apart by reason of those two bulges at his hips. His face was expressionless, his changeless blue eyes half concealed by the smoke of his cigar.

Toles Latimer acknowledged his presence with a scowl. "Mister Hickson," he murmured. "This is Edith Greer!"

Shanghai bowed, whipping off his hat. His eyes lifted to her frank, clear face with open admiration. She was a vital person whose every movement reflected a boundless joy of living. Her red lips, flattened a little too tightly, revealed the somberness of her thoughts.

"My pleasure, Miss Greer," murmured the Town-Tamer.

The girl nodded. And Toles Latimer put in: "From Abilene and Hays City, Edith."

The quick contraction of her eyes told Shanghai that he had been the object of their discussion. She turned toward the sheriff. "Toles, you mustn't miss that appointment with Mister Gabralt. You go along. I'll be glad of the opportunity of knowing Mister Hickson better."

"No one knows any gun-marshal, honey," he warned. "Nothing about them means a thing except the gun in their holsters."

"I only hope," murmured Shanghai, with exquisite courtesy, "that you are as wise in this appointment with Gabralt."

"Meaning what, Hickson?"

"He will condemn you," explained the Town-Tamer, "for extending me the courtesy of a badge. Don't be deceived. The leopard doesn't change its spots.

Gabralt, and those behind him, may put this business on the basis of humanity, decency and self-government—"

"Just what it is!" cut in the young sheriff, fiercely. "And it will be easier for me if you ride on."

"Your youth is impatient," smiled Shanghai. "Tell Gabralt that when my horse is rested, I'll be leaving. And don't forget that his worries are not only because I may stand in the way of his sacrifice of you . . . and Brule Crossing."

Latimer paled a little. He seemed to ponder the meat of the Town-Tamer's words. Then, with a curt nod to Shanghai and a tip of his hat to Edith Greer, he turned along the walk toward his rendezvous with the Brule Crossing boss.

Watching the man's purposeful stride, Shanghai was a little startled by the girl's blunt demand: "Why are you here, Mister Hickson?"

Shanghai faced her. "I feel, Miss Greer," he said softly, "that I do not flatter you when I say that you already know. My coming was quite inadvertant. I could have as readily gone by way of Springville. But I stay here for a purpose."

"What is it?" she persisted.

Shanghai traced a pattern with his boot toe. "Whatever it was that killed Sheriff Thomas is responsible for Toles Latimer's appointment. And also for the empty holster law. Miss Greer, this town is rotten underneath. The only respect I have for any part of Brule Crossing rests in you and Toles Latimer." He smiled at her. "You two are my real reason for staying on."

Fear made her eyes narrow. "Then you think Lank Endershot may be—the one behind it all?"

"I don't know Endershot," said Shanghai. "But I know his kind—a rapacious wolf. It puts Toles Latimer in a mighty dangerous spot. But he's no marshal or he'd have known better than to

disarm a whole town. He's proud and no one will be able to touch him like you can. Get him out of it, with as much grace as you can. But get him out! And when hell pops, ma'am, if I'm here, I'll fill in for him."

"But what can one man do against Lank Endershot and his gang?" she asked anxiously.

"I'll take care of Endershot!" The girl's eyes were suddenly admiring.

"You're so strong," she sighed. "And Toles is brave, too brave for one who knows nothing about guns. Thank you."

She held out her hand. Shanghai took it. Then he watched her walk to the general store. And when she had vanished from the street, her image was still with him; the blue of his eyes had deepened and there were lines of care framing his mouth.

"Hell!" he grinned. "It's the kind of a gamble I never could resist. They're lucky to have their youth and I'm lucky to have known them. Pierre Gaultier, I'm checkin' the bet to you."

CHAPTER

3 *A Gun-King's Defiance*

From the vantage point of an easy chair on the hotel porch, Shanghai Hickson watched the activities of Brule Crossing while seeming to drowse. He saw Toles Latimer emerge from the Prairie Queen Saloon, flushed of face, hot of eyes, his chin jutting angrily. Little more than a half hour later, Galt Gabralt came to the street to scan the hitch racks. Then, without appearing to notice the Town-Tamer, he came toward him.

"You?" he exclaimed, pausing to light his cigar. "Your horse must need a lot of conditioning, Hickson. You said you would leave town as soon as your horse was cared for."

"I'm a heavy man, Gabralt."

"Hickson!" The saloonman's face was

never more coldly impassive. "Until eight tonight you will be permitted to ride from Brule Crossing in peace. If you overstay that deadline, I'll be forced to call out our vigilance committee to judge your case. Of course, if you care to take off those weapons—"

"You know I'll never disarm."

The saloonman shrugged. "If you decline, the town can only assume that you are here as undercover man for Lank Endershot."

"What?" Shanghai half rose, his eyes fiery, "I'm a frontier marshal, Gabralt. I've spent the best years of my life standing between the Lank Endershots of this world and those who try to build decent homes in these new settlements!"

The saloonman smiled thinly believing he had the Town-Tamer on the defensive. "All gun-marshals are crooks, Hickson."

"Zeb Thomas?"

Gabralt scowled, "A dull-witted fool who couldn't understand the lingo, who interfered with legitimate trade. . . ."

Shanghai raised his brows as Edith Greer passed them with a swish of skirts. The red-faced saloonman followed suit, his dark eyes looking covetously after the girl.

Shanghai said: "She'll make young Toles Latimer a fine wife, Gabralt. Don't you think so?"

"I think," said the saloonman, venomously, "you'll make a fine corpse!"

He walked away to enter the stable. Minutes later, Shanghai saw him lope from the barn to vanish in the willows where the road dips into the bottomlands at the cattle crossing.

Shanghai Hickson was still holding to his seat on the hotel porch when darkness, cloaked the prairie. A slow mist was rising from the stream of Troublesome Fork and the dusty smell of parched earth was giving way to the cool and pungent fragrance of water growth. Lights sprang up.

The supper hour came and went, and still the Town-Tamer didn't stir. The clamor from the saloons rose to a higher pitch. Horses whirled in from the prairie and the walks resounded to the booted tread of pleasure-seeking cowboys, buffalo hidlers and freighters. It was an old scene to Shanghai, yet one that never lost its appeal to him. It was a new scene, in that the crash of gunpowder was absent. The saloon trade was orderly, cooperating nicely.

Now Toles Latimer came to Shanghai, sank into an adjoining chair.

"You sold Edith on your idea, whatever it is," he muttered moodily. "She's trying to make me promise I'll be a coyote and hunt a hole if trouble starts."

"I'd rather be a live coyote and have her," murmured the Town-Tamer, "than a dead wolf with some other man takin' up my slack. You do as she tells you, son. She's a smart girl."

The youngster grunted. "If there's trouble here and you use force to put it down," he promised, "the Vigilantes will hang you, sure. They're committed to make this a gunless town. If your guns roar in Brule Crossing, Hickson, you'll die—either way it goes."

"Marshals all die, kid. Death is too certain a thing to worry about. Get along now and get to your sparking. And whatever you do don't let Gabralt upset you. Good-night."

After the young sheriff had strode away, Shanghai went across to the Premier Restaurant.

Sly-eyed Hippy Gilligan served him with none of his usual garrulousness. Twice the busy lawman caught the old timer's quizzical glance upon him, grinned back but said nothing. Shanghai was finished and enjoying the first sweet puffs of his cigar when a rising clatter of hoof echoes struck through from the street. A clock on the shelf rang eight o'clock weakly.

THROUGH the powdery dust, Shanghai had a momentary glimpse of a cavalcade swerving to a rack. Riders lit down and went roaring into the Prairie Queen Saloon. But not all of them were in that group. Under hot spur, three more came swinging back to curb their ponies in a cruelly rearing stop. The pallid light from dusty panes limned them darkly.

An impatient voice thundered through the sudden stillness. "Where's that deadly gundog! Where's that Abilene killer?"

A heavy mirkiness touched Shanghai's fathomless eyes. He rose with studied deliberation, took time to lay out a coin in payment, loosened his guns in his holsters and calmly said: "I'll be obliged if you'll let me use your back door, my friend."

"Better be safe then sorry," nodded Hippy Gilligan. "Step right around the counter an' go through the kitchen. That's Lank Endershot an' his hellions."

"So I judge," commented the Town-Tamer. "I want to meet the gentleman and see what is was that Sheriff Zeb Thomas couldn't match."

Admiring lights came into the oldest's faded eyes, then dimmed. "The best I can tell yuh, Colonel," he brooded, "is to keep outa that street. But if you just gotta look at Lank, you'll be safer to have yore back thisaway." He lifted a long gun from beneath the counter, patted it pridefully. "It'll do all the shootin' from this side. Good luck to yuh, but I reckon you're bitin' off too big a chunk."

Shanghai only nodded, moving out through the back, then between buildings to pause at the inside edge of the walk. One by one, the normal sounds of the town had ceased, so that now the waiting rider's blatant challenge rang commandingly.

"Come out, Hickson! Let's have a look at the great lion of Abilene!"

Hippy Gilligan stood in the restaurant door now, his tightly held rifle out of

sight behind the panel. His mouth was hard, his eyes glittering as he saw the Town-Tamer's dark form lift to sidewalk level, heard the soft music of his spurs. From the far end of Fremont Street came the strident clamor of the iron triangle—tocsin calling the Vigilantes of Brule Crossing to the defense of a new deal of law and order. But nothing happened. Such citizens as were on the street remained glued in their tracks. Those who enjoyed the safety of indoors peered from portals and apertures, unmindful of their sworn responsibility.

From the gloom spot where he stood, Shanghai's low voice struck through the triangle echoes: "Here I am, Noisey! The three of you are wearin' guns. That's against the ordinance! Pitch up!"

The tall rider stiffened, swung in the saddle as his gun hand flashed holsterward. It left him facing poorly for the draw, but Shanghai was devoid of all sentiment in gun matters. His pistol flamed and the ugly crash ran raggedly back and forth between the fronts. The spokesman of the three renegade riders rose in his stirrups, shrilled a pain-filled cry and pitched to the ground. His two saddle mates, filled with the boldness that comes from overconfidence, reared their ponies and swept the place with gun flame where Shanghai had stood.

But the cagey Town-Tamer had lost himself in the shadows, finding a safer spot. From there his guns now boomed their deadly answer to the challenge of that reckless pair. Another of the riders wilted over his horn, uttering a despairing curse to his gun partner as he lost his hold, solid overside and was whirled into the night from the stirrup of his panicky pony.

It was too convincing an argument for the third renegade. His gun empty, he was all through and out of the fight. Hugging the withers, he whirled his pony, jabbed home the spurs and raced toward

the cattle crossing. And the night seemed to hold the fearful threat of those two deadly guns that had slain so suddenly, so savagely.

From the Prairie Queen Saloon came the charging men of Lank Endershot, each with leveled gun that gave back the reflected lights from soiled windows. Behind them, framed in the doorway, stood the tall, rawboned man from whom they took orders. His face was clouded, his eyes glinting with unmistakable savagery. Standing thus; with all the inhumanity of him laid bare, he seemed to be listening for the plaint from the first of his men to kneel by that limp form in the street.

"The bloody butcher!" the man cried. "He bushwhacked Buzz without a chance. Killed him!"

"An' finished another!" sang out some hidden watcher. "I saw it!"

LANK ENDERSHOT seemed to swell and a short, rough gust came from his throat. "The great Hickson draws first blood!" he boomed. "Shootin' men without cause as they prepare to check their guns! All right, that unties our hands! Two of you hit for the stable to watch his horse. Two take one end of the street an' two the other. He can't get out. The rest of you scatter out an' flush him. We'll tear down every shack in town to get him into the open. An' that kid sheriff—fetch him here! Get him, too!"

He sidled away from the lighted saloon portal like some giant crab. Already four of his men were mounting and riding to their stations at the street ends. And the shadowy walks were a-riot with the clank of spurs, the pound of boots and the slow patrol of the manhunters.

Every word that sheered through the tension came distinctly to the ears of the Town-Tamer as he backed, step by step along the narrow slot between buildings. And he drank in every movement of the campaign against him. A lesser man would

have made haste to quit a place that held so deadly a threat. But the formidable eyes of this lion of Abilene only flamed with a hard and merciless fury.

Reaching the untidy alley at the rear of the buildings, Shanghai moved with an effortless glide that carried him in due course to the rear of the hotel. Silently, he let himself inside, pausing in the darkened hall as voices struck through a curtain drape from the lobby.

"Damn him!" the voice of Toles Latimer raged. "He forced my hand, made me give him legal status here. I don't owe him anything. If I show my hand in this at all, honey, it must be against him. And I wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance. No, I'll stay out of it and let the Vigilantes attend to him."

"Toles!" The girl's voice vibrated with fervency. "And the Law and Order Committee is holding off—covering up. It bears out what I've told you before; Vigilante law is no law at all. You are the only one to lead them, and you elect to stay off the street. Heaven knows, that's where I want you, but it isn't fair. Endershot and his renegades—we all know what they are. Mr. Hickson, without any reason but decency, stands out there defying them—for us."

"For new notches on his gun!" countered the young sheriff, bitterly. "With men like him, one killing but whets his appetite for another."

"He's alone!" she answered.

Toles Latimer dropped his eyes in sudden embarrassment. And then Shanghai's unfeeling voice spoke from the parted curtains. "The important fact now is not me, but this misplaced young fool of a sheriff. Lank Endershot wants your blood, Latimer, only less than he wants mine. His men have orders to kill you on sight. If you value your life, get into one of the hotel rooms, lock it and prepare to defend yourself, and Miss Greer. If these wolves down me, they'll have

their way with Brule Crossing—liquor, loot and women. Hunt your hole and pull it in after you."

Latimer turned toward the Town-Tamer's voice, but Shanghai was gone and the soft closing of the back door told that he was again in the open, pressing the issue in the face of suicidal odds.

CHAPTER*Raider's Law*

4

Striding purposefully, Shanghai passed the rear of several buildings, then cut again to the street. He stood in the gloom like a great wolf that senses danger and strives to scent it. Again that awed tension held the town and through the breathless silence came the slow tramping of spurred and booted men.

Where he stood, a darker blot in the black gloom, Shanghai could have almost touched one of Endershot's men as he passed. Yet the Town-Tamer made no move to harm him. Instead, he thrust his head beyond the building line to look up and down Fremont Street. At the door of the Prairie Queen Saloon, a knot of men stood in an attitude of waiting. Hippy Gilligan still held to his place in the doorway of his restaurant, and Shanghai somehow felt comfort in the oldster's patent readiness.

Down at the hotel, he heard the solemn, even voice of Edith Greer. And though he could make out the words, his imagination told him plain enough that the argument with Toles Latimer went on and on.

"The stubborn young fools!" murmured the Town-Tamer. "I should have bundled them up and locked them up. That means this thing has got to break before they—"

Cutting back to the lane again, he moved to the rear of the Prairie Queen Saloon. A back door was locked. But a window gave to his hand and Shanghai stepped through. The tinkle of spurs was

coming toward him as he let the pane down behind him.

He found himself in a cluttered store-room, through which he made his way by feel. Then he stood before the light-framed panel leading to the barroom. Carefully, Shanghai opened the door to survey the lighted hall. It was quite empty, save for two men at one front window and three at another—curious patrons and quite unarmed. As silently as possible, Shanghai let himself in and stalked past the empty card tables to the front.

Those at the windows whirled to his step, fear showing starkly in their faces. The Town-Tamer let his eyes play over them.

"Stand where you are and make no sound," he warned. "But one yell out of you and you're bucking impossible odds."

"We'd be fools to buck you," muttered one.

Slowly, very slowly, he walked to the swing doors, shouldered them slightly ajar. Standing thus he could see in either direction, up and down the main street, without losing entirely his check upon the five behind him.

The expectant men, bunched on the walk before him, were completely unaware of his presence. With something as near nervousness as he ever showed, his glance shot down the street to the hotel front. He was just in time to see Toles Latimer step through the doorway, the light beam clearly revealing the dread seriousness of his expression. And—Shanghai could have sworn it—a firm frail hand propelled the young sheriff through the portal. Latimer squared his shoulders, his voice ringing bravely up the silent street.

"Sound that triangle, you Vigilantes! Endershot must be broken or we walk out! Every man in his place with a gun! Endershot, you and your men ground your weapons and surrender, or—" The clangorous beat of the triangle and rene-

gade laughter silenced him in no time.

Shanghai's pale eyes never shifted from the youngster, yet the sixth sense that had seen him through similar occasions didn't desert him. He seemed to know instinctively what men were doing in the deeper banks of gloom between lighted windows. One man, with his back to the front wall, straightened, elbowed another man aside, and swung his arms. The light ran along the blued barrel of a rifle and the breathless tension of Brule Crossing was sundered by the crashing echoes of a shot.

"Got him, Lank!" bawled the rifleman, and Shanghai pegged the voice instantly. It belonged to the one calling himself Galt Gabralt, self-styled dictator of Brule Crossing. The man whose funeral Shanghai had attended in Abilene.

Down at the hotel, Toles Latimer cried out piteously, staggered backward. Then, weakened by bullet shock, sank to his hands and knees. And the agonized screams of Edith Greer sheered through the gun echoes as she darted from the hotel to kneel beside the man she loved.

A scattered roar of acclaim lifted from the Lank Endershot riders. And through the turmoil, Shanghai Hickson's fervent fury tore like a malediction: "Nice shooting, Pierre Gaultier! Nice shooting!"

GABRALT, had he not recognized the voice, would have known it was the Town Tamer. For no other in Brule Crossing knew that he was not indeed Galt Gabralt. So, when he whirled about, his gun lifting again, the lever smashing fresh lead in the chamber. But it was Shanghai's weapon that spoke, the lead driving clear-through Gabralt's twisting figure, to sliver the boardwalk and to drive him down, writhing.

Even as the groan sounded in his throat, his eyes turned up to Shanghai Hickson with so intense a hate that not even death could cool it. There was a swift

scattering of those who had clustered before for the Prairie Queen Saloon.

From somewhere rose Hank Ender-shot's vengeful cry: "He's killed Galt Gabralt. Down him!"

Across the street, two muzzle flares streaked the gloom. Lead slugs chipped splinters from the louvered doors behind Shanghai and he caught the muzzle flashes, lifting his weapon to answer. But already the answer was shuddering from the doorway of the restaurant, where Hippy Gilligan cuddled the stock of his long Sharp's against his angular jaw. Two shots the old-timer cook cut loose, and the two gunmen went down in death.

Hippy Gilligan's strident rebel yell lifted startlingly. "Wah-hoo! I'm taking chips, Coyotes! There's my ante! Bet 'em like you got 'em, gents, an' sleep in the street! Wah-hoo!"

Half a dozen swift strides again took the Town-Tamer into the shadows, a little worried now. His luck had been too good. Five men were finished, and he was as yet untouched. And always a gunfighter's luck balances. . . .

His eyes went again to the hotel where Edith Greer had gotten Latimer to his feet—not bad hurt, from all the sign.

But a movement beyond the young sheriff took Shanghai's interest. Down the axis of Fremont Street came a body of men, close-packed and moving with practiced deliberation. A score or more of them, their boots flashing in the dim light, their bared guns an open challenge to war. The Vigilantes!

An impressive sight, they were, as they came ponderously on. A sight to stir the feelings of every man who watched. Townsman committed to peace, betting their lives that lawful processes would triumph in the end. Their eyes were hard and searching; their mouths grim.

For a fractional second, Shanghai watched them come, both scorn and ad-



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TOWN-TAMER LAW

miration in his eyes. Then his attention was attracted to the tall, ungainly man who strode to meet them—the man who had stood in the door of the Prairie Queen and ordered the slaying of Sheriff Toles Latimer and the Town-Tamer. Lank Endershot. He lighted his hand and his voice was ringing.

"Boys," Endershot's voice was thick with passion "The sheriff ordered you out. Ordered you to take steps ag'in' me an' my boys. Don't be misled. I came here in friendship. Me an' my boys, against who all sorts of false charges has been made. We was checkin' our guns when this Kansas murderer started his crazy gunplay. There is need here right now for each of you, need for some sort of law to stand between the decent folks of this town and the deadly gunman—Shanghai Hickson. Here's the play: Hickson came here and bought your sheriff, Toles Latimer. For why, I dunno. Between 'em, they've already made these streets run red. At least five men has died. Among 'em is Galt Gabralt. You all knew Galt. One of the town's best citizens. You gonna let 'em get away with that?"

The Vigilantes committee had stopped to hear him out, as Endershot faced Shanghai, a gun naked in his hand. And now a low muttering ran through their ranks. A bitter laugh fell from the Town Tamer's lips. His own gun came out. The Vigilantes, leaderless and confused, had halted, patently impressed. And Lank Endershot's men were moving slowly and covertly along the street. The tension, relieved in the crash of gunfire, was building again.

Shanghai held to his stand, his great head taut on his thick shoulders, his breath coming in swifter gusts. Out of his long experience came pointed warning of the gathering storm. Yonder Vigilantes looked at Lank Endershot and saw only the image of the man that had grown in

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the popular mind. Shanghai saw in him a lesser character who, until a moment before, had been entirely under the domination of Galt Gabralt. Now, with his chief slain, the renegade was making a bold play for leadership.

If he could but hold that grim-tempered committee until his men had gathered behind him, Fremont Street would become a shambles, men would die and the balance of power in Brule Crossing would pass to Lank Endershot.

SHANGHAI HICKSON gathered himself. Endershot must be faced down and discredited if an open battle were to be avoided. And the only safe way, the sensible way, was for the frontier marshal to drop Endershot from where he stood. With that in mind, his gun barrel tilted upward. But he didn't fire.

Men he had killed, many of them. They had called him a murderer, a bushwhacker, a hungry killer. But no man could say that he had ever taken a life from behind.

Then Shanghai was striding to place himself directly in the line of fire.

From the fore rank of the Vigilante committee came a doubtful query: "You or your men killed Sheriff Zeb Thomas, Endershot! How do ye know that this ain't some more of your accursed devilment?"

"You've got to believe me!" shouted the renegade. "The safety of this town depends on it. Stand with me against this Kansas killer and you'll save what you gained by Galt Gabralt's empty holster ordinance! Stand there in doubt, and Shanghai Hickson will rule Brule Crossing with a smoking gun. It's up to you!"

A cry was wrung from Toles Latimer, where he had broken loose from Edith Greer's grasp at the hotel door. "Don't believe a word he says! Gabralt's empty holster ordinance was designed to make it safe for Endershot and his men to raid

the town. He told me so this morning, bragged that before he left this town he'd have stripped it clean. Told me I could like it and take my cut, or fill a gunshot grave. This was the night Endershot was to take us apart. Shanghai Hickson has saved us so far. Are we going to help a renegade defeat the only law we've got? No!" From his waistband, he whipped a long barreled pistol. "Endershot, drop that that gut and raise your hands!"

Lank Endershot's weasel face was suddenly stamped with a starkly evil smile and his yellow-bordered eyes sparkled at Latimer with beady malevolence.

"Stay out of this, you weak fool!" he rasped.

Shanghai stepped off the walk, took three long strides into the street. His feet spread wide against the numbing shock of lead and he cocked the hammer of his piece. It was a final gesture.

"Endershot!" he called stridently. "Turn around!"

But the renegade didn't move. The legend of the Hickson gun honor bulked too heavy within him to permit fear, as long as his back was to the Town-Tamer. His dark eyes were glowing upon the young sheriff as he called again. "Go back inside, Latimer! You'll be killed, you young fool!"

And he fired from the hip. Toles Latimer shuddered and the girl's scream was despairing. Then the young lawman aimed his weapon and fired. With a furious, raging bawl, Lank Endershot fell.

Brule Crossing suddenly rocked with gun concussion. Toles Latimer was down and someone was helping the girl drag him inside. Shanghai was in the shadows again, smashing lead at the skulking leaderless Endershot renegades. From the front of the restaurant, Hippy Gilligan was smoking the men of Lank Endershot from their coverts.

One by one, the aroused Vigilantes

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were taking up the rage of battle. It was too much for the undisciplined outlaws. They gave ground. Then they were racing to their mounts, to fling aside and stream from Brule Crossing. A last final volley tumbled two of them from their saddles, and the rest were gone.

A blood curdling yell beat upward and Hippy Gilligan was limping out to grasp the hand of the Town-Tamer.

"Shanghai Hickson, sir!" he cackled. "I'm proud, sir, to have throwed in my lead with yours. Proud!"

Shanghai's face was bleak, but a softer light cooled the leaping fires of his eyes.

"My friend," he said. "You're a credit to your town. It gives me pleasure to shake the hand of a brave man."

Men gave way before Shanghai as he walked into the hotel. Just over the threshold, he paused. On a lounge, at the rear of the lobby, the doctor knelt beside Toles Latimer. The girl and several others looked on. A smile of gratitude broke the lines of worry. Her hand went to his.

"Thank you!" she murmured.

"Latimer?" he asked.

"Bad enough," she said soberly. "But he'll get well, and when he does I'm taking him back to Kansas City, leaving this savage land to the savages!"

Dull fire touched Shanghai's big eyes. "Don't do that, ma'am," he pleaded. "The boy has found himself this night. Found the only thing needed to make him a great frontier peace officer—when his duty—" he smiled wistfully—"pushed him out this door. A land without law remains always savage. A man can dedicate his life to no finer task."

"Perhaps you're right," she conceded. "I'll not stand in his way of success, hard as it may be for me. Mister Hickson, as soon as Toles is able, we will be married. I will be very happy if you can be at the ceremony. How long will you be in Brule Crossing?"

"Hardly long enough, Miss Greer," said the Town-Tamer. "Thanking you most kindly. I'll be here only until my horse and myself are rested. I very much doubt that Brule Crossing will need my kind of law for some little time."

THEY smiled at each other for a long moment. Then Edith Greer rose to tip-toe. Her arms went around his neck and she kissed him on the mouth. There was a hint of a sob in her throat.

"Thank you again," she choked. "We'll always be thinking of you, always be grateful, Toles and I."

She swung away, running lightly back to the lounge where the doctor worked at Latimer's wounds.

Shanghai stared after her, without seeing her at all. His thought were far back along his hard backtrail, playing with the vision of a girl much like this one. A girl much too good for a man whose lease on life was definitely sealed with the brand of a gun.

When he turned out through the crowded door way, the blue of his eyes had deepened and his face seemed suddenly old. Men gave way before him, with the shrinking that comes from awe and repugnance. It was always to be just like this. . . .

Shanghai walked directly to the stable, saddled his horse and rode out the rear of the barn. And so, unobserved by those he had served for a brief moment, he loped away from Brule Crossing.

His hat hung by its chin-strap from the horn. The free winds of the plains blew his tawny hair. And the threat of the perilous trails, which he knew he could never leave, running before him, leading to the inevitable last trigger pressure, to the last gun blast, to the last conscious moment of a life dedicated to violence—and its suppression.

THE END

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(Continued from page 79)

"He'll make it and so will you if you're willing to take it easy," Nina said. "You've got to make up your mind that your precious *Herald* will miss an issue, but it will have a great story when it does come off the press. Red got to town just in time. I sent him and Dad right down there."

"Lytell?"

"He's dead, and Wade's in jail. Dad got a wire off to the irrigation company's office in Portland and he's had an answer. They'll send another man down here. It's a big outfit, I guess, but River Street was Lytell's business."

Ed lay thinking about that for a moment. River Street would be closed, but there would always be these decisions to make, to back up or fight, to carry the truth on the front page of the *Herald* or take the easy way out as Lon Patton and Joe Becker had done. His mind was all confused.

He searched for the right words, knowing that this was more important than any editorial he had ever written. He said finally, hoping she would understand, "A newspaper man's wife has to share her husband with his paper. Will you marry me, knowing that?"

"Yes." She stooped and kissed him. "I learned that last night. I'm proud of you, Ed. Awfully proud. You should have heard what Dad and Red Castle said about you. They are as proud of you as I am."

He smiled a little then. He had learned something, too. There was no feeling of inadequacy in him now. Probably he would never be a good hunter or fisherman; probably he would never be able to ride anything but his ancient black gelding, but those failings were not important. If a man had a hard core of courage, he'd get along in this country.

THE END

KILLER LOSE ALL

(Continued from page 54)

fair, and no man could tell what cruelties were stored up in the dog's brute mind against Phil Price.

The woman came to the front door, and Lefty raised the gun. He pulled the trigger, and the moon was high enough to give him light to shoot by.

The old dog met death as though he knew his job was done. The slug took him in the brain and he dropped and did not even twitch.

"Don't look! Get back into the house and don't look!" Lefty shouted at Lois.

She went back inside, not understanding, but instinctively obeying the fierce ring in his voice. Lefty himself had trouble looking. He went over and stood above them, dead man and dead dog. The dog's death had been the cleanest.

"But so was its' life," he said.

He went into the house, and Lois slumped into his arms as though she belonged there. He patted her hair.

"It's my fault," she chattered, over and over. "I thought I was doing the right thing but it was all wrong, wasn't it? I thought I was preventing trouble but I was just making it worse, wasn't I? I made you suffer, didn't I? Oh, Lefty, you've been so good to me!"

She belonged there, and she knew it now. There was no blood between them, no guilt. He had whipped Phil Price, but he hadn't killed him. Those kids of Jim Haney's never would have to wonder why their step-dad killed another man who liked their mother. . . .

Things kind of squared themselves. Why, even Jim Haney had evened up the score. Drive was Jim's dog. It was like Jim was a little sorry for his shiftless, worthless ways. It was as though Jim had reached out of the grave to square things, to clear the way for his sidekick and the woman who had been his wife.

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(Continued from page 95)

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of Holcomb's hurried arrival, and of the marshal's excited words to Tod Brad-dock:

"Ogle knew Preston had been in some bank holdups—they've been writing each other while Jim was away—and wanted money to keep quiet. But Dan didn't bring any cash tonight, and Ogle got anxious. He followed Dan to the Pride, heard part of the talk inside, from the walk, and decided to throw in with Maxie. Ogle told me this a minute ago when he thought he was going to cash his chips. Jumped me to try shaking loose those three I was herding to jail. Maxie got away—not far, I notice—but I put lead in Ogle and the other two quit cold."

So it was all over. Dan felt brief pity for weak, self-indulgent Jim Preston, who had arrogantly demanded Mary's love instead of working to earn it. But maybe at the last there had been a touch of iron in his backbone; maybe he had redeemed himself a little when he had swung his gun away from Dan Tyler, trying instead for Maxie. Dan decided he would think so, anyway. It was easier to think well of Preston, now that he was no longer alive to bother them.

There must, he felt, be shock in Mary which would linger quite a while. He'd have to bide his time, wait and be patient, but he had already proven to himself that he was good at waiting.

"Dan, that saddle—" Mary said. "I'd like it, now. Because I can give you something in return for it, if you wish. All the rest of my life."

Her face was turned up to him. He kissed her for the first time. The rest of her life. He hoped it would be a long one. They'd both be mighty old, he was certain, before what he felt about her wore the least bit thin.

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Start your big business backed by this 47-year-old, million-dollar company. Make money from the first hour, taking orders for fast-selling, customer-satisfying outdoor garments! You just walk in, take your order, collect liberal advance profit, and go on to the next eager customer! You get **FREE SELLING OUTFIT**—everything you need to start cashing in on your first call.

The Garment Men WANT and WILL BUY!

Smooth, gleaming, satin-twill defies winter blasts! Big, luxurious fur collar, **WATER CAN'T HURT IT!** Just **ZIP-OFF** Luskim Lamb collar for warm weather, makes two coats out of one! Easy to put collar on, take it off, with smooth-acting zipper.

WITH NYLON!*

Sturdy, handsome 33" long coat almost "wear-out proof" because it is **1/5 NYLON!** Warm, snug Intercol quilted lining, knitted wrist bands, keep you warm on coldest days!



ALSO SELL EXCLUSIVE Velvet-eez AIR-CUSHIONED SHOES for MEN AND WOMEN

Make plenty of extra money with popular, fast selling full leather lined Chukka Boot and scores of other fine footwear styles with this wonderful "Velvet-eez comfort feature!" Cradles feet on thousands of tiny air bubbles, rests feet while you work or stand. Over 150 different styles for men, women, with Velvet-eez and other comfort, and style features. Full line of sport, work and dress shoes. Make extra money with smart line of shirts, raincoats, sport jackets



National Advertising Opens Door for You

Big, powerful ads in Good Housekeeping and other national magazines make you known to people as the Mason Certified Shoe Fitter. You get the benefit—we pay the **BILLS!**

Good Housekeeping Seal Clinches Sales for You

Mason's VELVET-EEZ shoes awarded the Good Housekeeping Seal. This Seal ends hesitation. Helps you sell more customers more items. You make more money when you handle this great line and enjoy the support of the institution people depend on for Guaranteed Satisfaction.



FREE OUTFIT HELPS YOU CLINCH EASY SALES

"I have had many experiences where I have sold as many as 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 pairs in one sitting. I received a phone call from one party, who wanted 2 pairs of shoes. I went to his store and made 7 sales."

Harry R. Williamson

RUSH THE COUPON TODAY!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-688, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

Show me how I can get started in my own business, full or spare time, selling your exclusive Velvet-eez and other shoe styles in my community. Please rush **FREE SELLING OUTFIT** to me right away. Send everything free and postpaid. My own shoe size is:....

Name

Address

City

State

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-688, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

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OUTFIT**

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...that's why everyone wants

"BOTANY"
brand
wrinkle-proof ties



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"Botany" Brand Wrinkle-Proof Ties are the gift.
Neckwear that deserves to be hung on any
man's Christmas tree because it constantly renews
its smooth beauty—the wrinkles disappear
overnight. Pick his favorites from a big, cheerful
selection of Yule-spirited colors and patterns.
He'll appreciate them all. \$1, \$1.50 up.

Listen to the Botany Song Shop starring Ginny
Simms, ABC Network, Sunday evening. See your
local paper for station and time.

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P. O. BOX 149, BOTANY MILLS, INC.,
PASSAIC, N. J.

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A "BOTANY" BRAND
LANOLIN LIPSTICK
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Simply send us a rider ticket or label from
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Tie (address at left) and we will send
you a \$1 "Botany" Brand Lanolin Lipstick.
Offer is limited to one lipstick per
customer and expires Dec. 31, 1950.
Offer good only in Continental U. S. A.

LOOK FOR THE "BOTANY" BRAND LABEL ON PRODUCTS FOR MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN
